

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History Interviewing Tips

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The following information has been compiled from a variety of sources and provides information and tips about conducting successful oral history interviews. It covers:

1) Contacting the Interviewees, 2) Planning the Interviews, 3) Preparing your Equipment, 4) The Interview itself, 5) Interview Techniques, 6) Legal Release

**Overview** There is no one way to conduct an oral history interview. Each interview will follow its own path, concentrating on the special features, interests, and involvement of the teller - the things at the center of that person's life. For example, if he or she lived through a war, you will want to ask questions about that. And, of course, the tone of the interview will be affected by the relationship between teller and interviewer. However, here are some questions that you might consider to make sure that you cover as many parts of the person's life as possible. They are only suggestions. Perhaps, choose the ones that are most important to you and then trust your own instincts and natural curiosity.

**1) Contacting the Interviewee** - two steps, A. Letter explaining your project: Purpose, Sponsorship, Expected procedure. Use of tapes/transcripts/camcorder. Legal Release (optional). B. Initial Visit: Work with interviewee to plan outline. Ask for personal papers for interview preparation. Get acquainted. Answer any questions about your project. Discourage interviewee from relating stories in detail. Check out interview location. Evaluate how much research will be worthwhile, how detailed questions to prepare.

**2) Planning the Interviews.** Prepare an outline for interviewee and yourself. So interviewee can refresh memory. So you won't wander. So interviewee understands seriousness of undertaking. Don't submit detailed questions, just subject areas.

**3) Prepare your equipment.** Decide what is needed for the interview and be sure to check condition of equipment.

**4) The Interview,** Location. Persons present - usually interviewer and interviewee at best. Time - interviewee's convenience, health. Take notes - for the transcriber for spelling. Be prompt. Arrive on time and leave near the stated time.

**5) Interview Techniques.** Start out with easy questions, usually those establishing identity. Be an active listener. Pick up on things the interviewee says. Don't be so busy with the outline or next question you don't listen. Don't rush the interviewee; give him/her time to think. People can usually describe concrete things more easily than conceptual. Start with the concrete. Ask one question at a time. If you ask a string of questions the interviewee will answer the first and last one only. Ask who, what, where, when, why questions that require more than a yes-no answer. Keep establishing where the interviewee was at the time, how he or she knows that. Make it possible for your interviewee to describe negative as well as positive aspects of a situation or person. Avoid "off the record" information. Try to keep the interview "on target." Oral history interviews are planned interviews.

**6) Legal Release** Have it ready to sign at the end of the interview.

**Housekeeping:** Before you even start asking questions, though, start the tape by identifying the interviewee by name, and the place, and the date of the interview. Add your own name and your relationship with the interviewee. As with photographs, these details may be perfectly obvious to you now, but a clear identification is important because the tape will be kept for the future. Then, quite casually, lead into some of the basic initial questions. If you appear relaxed and confident, the interviewee will quickly loosen up and overcome any natural nervousness.