



## Oral History

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Oral history is a method for obtaining insight into the processes and dynamics of social history by interviewing people who participated in or were affected by those processes. By documenting the lives and endeavors of ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, and labor movements, it has given a voice to traditionally marginalized populations. It has been an especially effective tool for lifting the curtain of invisibility from glbtq history.

### The Emergence of Oral History

Oral history came into its own as a valid approach to historical research in the last half of the twentieth century and was popularized through the work of Studs Terkel and George Plimpton. Because it is derived from individuals' memories--sometimes decades after the events being discussed--it has had to overcome the stigma of being subjective and inaccurate with detail. Its practitioners rightly point out that human behavior is more a product of people's *perceptions* of events than of the events themselves. Thus, oral history investigates the processes by which individuals accord significance and react to the social forces taking place around them.

Oral history is distinguished from other forms of personal recollection, such as diaries and memoirs, by the fact that it is a record of spoken conversations, and thus has a spontaneity and immediacy often edited out of written works. A collection of taped interviews and transcripts is the resulting product. These may be further processed into edited publications or multimedia presentations and ultimately deposited in an archive or library.

### Uses of First-person Accounts

Oral history has had a significant role in overcoming the invisibility surrounding gay and lesbian lives. The 1977 film by Peter Adair, *Word Is Out*, was constructed from interviews with 26 gay men and women. For many viewers it was their first experience of seeing gay men and lesbians interviewed in full light, without overtones of shame or stigma.

Modern gay history has benefited substantially from first-person accounts. Eric Marcus in *Making History* (1992) tapped the recollections of more than fifty individuals for a selective look at the gay rights movement between 1945 and 1990. David Isay's 1990 radio documentary *Remembering Stonewall* dramatically conveyed the first-person viewpoints of some of the participants.

Allan Bérubé's research on the participation of gays and lesbians in World War II military and factory settings, *Coming Out under Fire* (1990), and J.T. Sears' examination of glbtq experiences in the south during the Cold War and Civil Rights eras, *Lonely Hunters* (1997), both drew substantially from first-person accounts. Kennedy and Davis's interviews with 45 women were the primary source material for their study of the blue-collar lesbian community in Buffalo, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993).

Two important chroniclers of gay life in New York, George Chauncey and Charles Kaiser, incorporate oral history with archival research, as do Marc Stein for Philadelphia and Gary Atkins for Seattle. Robert Rothman and Myron Plett have created an interesting online collection of gay men's stories from Vancouver.

Life-history interviews provide the main text for two interesting collections. In *Growing Up before Stonewall* (1994), Peter Nardi, David Sanders, and Judd Marmor create psychological profiles to illustrate how eleven gay men of the pre-Stonewall generation made sense of their identity. In *Gay Old Girls* (1998), Zsa Zsa Gershick's interviews with nine elderly lesbians provide rare glimpses into lesbian life of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

British viewpoints are collected in publications by the Hall-Carpenter Archives and Lisa Power's history of an activist group, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles* (1995). For Canada, Michael Brown uses oral history in his study of AIDS activism in Vancouver, *Replacing Citizenship* (1997); and Michael Riordan, in *Out Our Way* (1996), addresses the experiences of rural gays.

Anthologist Juanita Ramos found oral history an effective way to include the perspectives of U. S. Latina women who did not consider themselves writers. A recent work in Spanish by Norma Mongrovejo addresses lesbian concerns relative to gay male and feminist influences in Latin America. Eric Wat, in *The Making of a Gay Asian Community* (2002), focuses on the need of Asian-American gay men to define their own identity.

Oral history can also be used to reconstruct the atmosphere of glbtq venues, as in Don Paulson's portrait of a drag cabaret, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah* (1996), or to compile a collective portrait of a community over time, as in Ruth Pettis's account of Seattle, *Mosaic 1* (2002). Other topics that have been addressed through recorded interviews are the AIDS crisis (Bayer and Oppenheimer), lesbian and gay teachers (Kissen), and women's music festivals (Morris).

### **Doing Oral History**

Oral history requires sensitivity to the target population and familiarity with basic recording techniques. The skills involved can be learned relatively quickly, however, making it a good method for community-based researchers. Those just starting out should check the holdings of local libraries, museums, or historical societies and avail themselves of any training they offer.

Web sites from Baylor University's Institute for Oral History and the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley provide tutorials, readings lists, and resources for starting a project. Several glbtq organizations are also actively compiling or maintaining oral history collections.

Chances are you already know individuals with stories of "the old days" you want to get on tape before they are lost. When you contact a prospective interviewee (called "narrator" in oral history parlance), explain the purpose of the project and how you got her or his name (a reference from someone she or he knows makes this task much easier). Offer to send a brochure or other written description of your project. If she or he is willing to proceed, schedule an interview and gather some basic biographical information: birth year, birthplace, locale(s) where she or he grew up and lived, occupation, ethnicity, and list of possible discussion topics.

### **Equipment**

Older manuals recommend reel-to-reel recorders, but audiocassette and video recorders are widely used at this time. Do not use a cassette recorder's built-in microphone; their poor sound quality makes any subsequent use, especially transcription, difficult. An external microphone is worth the modest investment.

Use 60-minute tapes. They are less apt to snarl and less subject to "print-through" (sound echoes) after storage. Get past your equipment's learning curve *before* your first interview.

## **Interviewing**

Most interviews take place in the narrator's or interviewer's home. Cafes or other public settings are too noisy. The best choice is a carpeted room with no appliances running. Background noises--radios, televisions, air conditioners, and hum from fluorescent lights--impair the clarity of the tape. Politely request that these be turned off or that the interview take place in a room isolated from their sound. If necessary medical equipment is running, compensate through microphone placement or boosting the recording level.

Pause the tape during noise from sirens or airplanes. When again underway, ask the narrator to repeat his last statement. It is appropriate to respond to the narrator's comments, but cultivate the habit of using non-verbal cues as much as possible (smiling, nodding), so that the narrator's voice comes through clearly.

A microphone may make some narrators nervous at first. In that case, begin with easily answered questions, such as year and place of birth, and gradually introduce more open-ended questions. Others might be born storytellers who can be prompted from the start with, "Tell me that story about ...."

Prepare a set of questions beforehand, but be flexible and allow for spontaneity. Questions will vary according to whether the narrator is an activist, an academic, a person who came out at midlife, a tavern regular, a parent, a child of a gay parent, or a member of a religious congregation. Try to elicit sensory detail (sights and sounds). For example, you might ask for a description of the narrator's first visit to a gay venue or first encounter with another gay person, and how the reality compared to the expectations.

If a topic evokes tears or emotion, give the narrator a chance to regain composure before continuing. Gently offer to pause the tape or change the subject if he wishes. Most will insist on carrying on, however, because this is the type of experience that they wish to get on record.

If a narrator uses gestures and facial expressions, describe them on tape for the listener. Ask the narrator to define slang terms for the benefit of those listening after their meaning is lost. Don't worry about how *you* come across. If later on you think your questions sounded naive or silly, remember that future scholars will be grateful for information that has disappeared from common knowledge.

As the interview nears an end, give the narrator an opportunity to introduce any other topics he or she wants to cover. Close the interview by thanking the narrator and any other participants.

## **GLbtq Topics and Issues**

One of my favorite questions is, "What did you want to be when you grew up?" because it often elicits descriptions of childhood gender contrariness. "When were you first aware of your sexual orientation (or gender identity)?" will take many narrators back to pre-teen years. Be aware that some will interpret this to mean the age of their first sexual experience; if so, you can have an interesting discussion on sexuality as activity versus mental or emotional state.

"When you first came out, did you get any advice from others on how to act? Did you try to emulate anyone else?" can reveal shared values and unwritten codes of conduct. "Did you know of anyone who had a bad reputation in the community? If so, for what?" can reveal social forces that undermined cohesion.

Try to get past commonly held stereotypes. If a narrator says, "We were all butch or femme back then," diplomatically inquire if this was true of everyone or just those in the narrator's social circle. If some did not conform, were they from a different social background? The answers might reveal community divisions in effect at the time and indicate other groups to interview.

If a story sounds like an urban legend, politely ask if the narrator directly experienced or witnessed the incident(s), or heard about them from someone else. As you gain experience you will start to recognize patterns of popular assumptions.

For example, in inquires into Seattle's 1950s bar culture, narrators often mention a blue law stipulating that people could be arrested for not wearing at least three items of gender-appropriate clothing. We have found no record of such a law, but the fact that many *believed* this to be so no doubt influenced how they dressed for an evening at the bars.

Avoid outing or defaming identifiable third parties. Likewise, avoid discussions that jeopardize anyone's legal or professional status--for example, on use of illegal drugs or clandestine entry into the country. If these are essential elements of the narrator's account, she or he might consider using a pseudonym or sealing the records until a later time.

### **Legal Releases**

In the United States, to publish people's words you need their signed permission. This requires establishing trust with narrators and apprising them, as best as you can, of what will be done with the tapes and transcripts. The Rainbow History Project and the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project provide samples of their wordings online.

Some narrators might impose restrictions on use of the interview. Common ones include not using names of third parties mentioned, or not divulging certain information until a given number of years have passed. In the latter case, use an edited transcript until the specified time has elapsed. It is helpful to have a relationship with a library or archive that has procedures in place for administering such requests.

Avoid making agreements that require you to keep requesting permission for subsequent uses of the material. The narrator might move and be impossible to locate, or pass away without leaving clear instructions.

### **Conclusion**

Send letters of thanks to narrators, and keep them informed of events and milestones the project has reached. If a publication results, make sure they get complimentary copies.

You still have much work to do: copying tapes, "logging" (listing) their contents, getting them transcribed, "auditing" (proofreading) the transcripts. Do not let such details discourage you; the work is vital and priceless. At the advent of the twenty-first century, the survivors of the pre-liberation era are in their 70s and 80s, and there is a limited window of time left in which to record a meaningful first-person account of their culture.

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**Ruth M. Pettis** is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.