

# How to organize an oral history program

On the surface, oral history appears to be uncomplicated and very easy to do. But, in fact, you must do a great deal of planning beforehand if you want good results. Remember that "quality, not quantity" of interviews counts, especially if your tapes are ever to be used by researchers, or for school or radio programs.

1. The first thing you have to decide is the specific areas you want to explore in your oral history program. While it is possible to interview older residents just for their reminiscences, a better interview can be created if you consider the information the interviewee can contribute to a specific topic. For example, if you want to interview the pioneers of your district, you should decide what aspect of their life you want to cover. Do you want them to talk about their life before they came to your area, or do you want them to discuss their early life in Ontario? Or, maybe you will want to trace the establishment, growth and development of your town. In that case, you will have to interview businessmen and former mayors.

Whatever area you decide to pursue, remember to have a definite subject matter in mind.

2. The next step is to thoroughly research your topic. This is very important. It will be difficult to conduct a good interview unless you are familiar with the topic being discussed. Depending upon your subject matter, this research may take as long as three or four weeks.

To research your area, a trip to the library is necessary. Read general history books, old newspaper clippings (most libraries have a clippings file section), diaries and specific books on your topic. From the information you have read, make notes. This will help during the actual interview.

3. Now you can prepare a list of questions or headings based on your

research. You will want to cover these areas when you are interviewing.

On the next page there are sample questions for pioneers who immigrated to Ontario at the turn of the century.

4. This accomplished, you now prepare a list of people who might serve as potential interviewees. Then, contact these people by letter or telephone, arranging a time and place to meet with them. This preliminary contact is known as the pre-interview.

## THE PRE-INTERVIEW

1. One of the reasons for this planning session is to determine whether or not the person has anything worthwhile to say. So, at the pre-interview, talk with the person about his background and about the subject on which he will be interviewed. Tell him that you are thinking of interviewing people on a specific area, but keep this indefinite as you may decide later that the person is not a suitable subject. Also, inquire if he knows other people who might be useful interviewees.

2. Once you have determined that the interviewee is a suitable person to interview, talk with him about very specific areas in order to get more information.

After the pre-interview, write up a list of questions that you will be asking during the actual interview. The questions should be kept short, so you can adjust the emphasis of your query to suit the individual.

## THE INTERVIEW

1. Meet at a conveniently pre-arranged time and location. Choose a quiet place away from noise and interruption. If the interview is conducted in the person's home, do not set up the equipment in the kitchen. Hums made by the refrigerator and other appliances will be picked up by the microphones.

The best room for the interview is

the living room. This is usually the quietest room in the house. Be sure that the television and radio are not turned on. Place the recorder on a solid base, but be sure that the air vents of your machine are not blocked if the tape recorder is placed on a carpet. Place the microphone on a table between the two of you.

2. If, for one reason or another, you found that you could not arrange a pre-interview session, allow a minimum of 15 minutes prior to recording the interview to talk with the interviewee about the topic.

3. While setting up the equipment, chat casually to help relax the interviewee. Test the recorder with a "trial" run, by turning it on and running the tape for a few minutes. Make sure that the machine is threaded properly and that the machine is set to "record". Then rewind the tape to the beginning.

4. Start the interview by asking for such information as the name, origin, age, education, occupation and ambitions of the interviewee. This "identifying data" is important if a tape is to be of lasting value since it provides factual information.

5. As the session moves ahead, the interviewee will begin to relax. Listen attentively and quietly. Remember that the interviewee is your main point of interest so do not give your own opinion on tape. Also, avoid arguing with the facts as the interviewee presents them. How a person perceives events may be historically incorrect but his interpretation of the facts may be more important. If the interviewee confuses dates and events perhaps it would be an idea to write a note on the outline to this effect, then any future user of the outline and tape will realize these inconsistencies. Do try to have the interviewee give as many dates as possible, as this helps to give the future listener a better chronological view of events.

Rather than interrupt the inter-