

To: SAIL MEMBERS
From: SAIL's Personal Memoirs Project (PMP) Group
Re: "Everyone Has A Personal Story" Packet of Materials

Background: At SAIL's October 2008 Member Advisory Group meeting, SAIL member Jim Batt suggested a project to encourage SAIL members to record their various life reminiscences for family and friends. He also urged SAIL members to consider donating these reminiscences to the Wisconsin Historical Society or a similar organization as a representative social history resource of "our era." Jim's idea generated immediate interest. Since then, a small group of interested SAIL members (PMP Group) has been meeting periodically to develop this packet of materials to help members get started. These materials incorporate lessons learned from actual interviewing.

Packet Description: The PMP Group recognizes that some SAIL members may already have begun or even finished their own memoirs project. The attached packet of materials has been assembled to assist and encourage SAIL members who wish to begin or complete their own memoir recording project to do so. The emphasis is on reminiscences and not genealogy, family medical history, or journaling. Included in the attached packet are:

- personal memoirs/oral history information "to get started" from various organizations such as National Public Radio's Story Corps - including sample questions,
- lists of relevant community resources including adult education courses related to personal memoirs and contact information for professionals available to provide experienced help for a fee, and
- a copy of SAIL's interview permission.

Recommendations: Here are some of the PMP Group's key recommendations:

- Choose an interviewer you are comfortable with. Be sure to decide in advance if the interviewer has or does not have permission to keep a copy of the interview. If you are interviewed by a SAIL member volunteer (see next point), you will need to sign SAIL's Permission For Use Form (page 6).
- If you do not have an interviewer in mind, a SAIL volunteer interviewer may be available at some mutually convenient time. The volunteer will meet with the interviewee for a pre-interview session, conduct an interview of approximately 45 minutes, and see that the oral interview is copied onto a CD, if the interviewee provides the CD.
- There are many technologies appropriate for reminiscences ranging from written memoirs to cam recording/audio-visuals. For members preferring oral histories instead of written memoirs, we strongly recommend that a digital recorder be used and that the recorded interview then be "burned" onto a CD as soon as possible. While tapes used to be the common technology for oral histories, tapes are becoming obsolete. If an interviewee prefers the interview to result in a DVD rather than a CD, that person will have to make his or her own arrangements since DVD technology is beyond the scope of our Group's current knowledge and expertise.
- Do not plan to start a memoir interview "cold." We strongly recommend a pre-interview conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee (preferably separate but

back-to-back is OK) to clarify the topics to be covered and to decide whether the interview is intended to be a “stand alone” single interview or the first in a series of recorded interviews. Plan for a single recorded interview of approximately 45 minutes each. Interviewers should be active listeners who are appropriately flexible about structure and content.

Please call Lynn Pauly at SAIL (230-4321) if you want to borrow SAIL’s recorder with instruction manual and/or to be paired with a volunteer interviewer.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact a member of SAIL’s PMP Group listed below:

Carol Brown 271-4153 <cbrown7034@aol.com>

Johanna Ghei 233-5261 <joghei@aol.com>

Sue Goldstein 833-7851 <goldstes@firstweber.com>

June Weisberger 238-7337 <jmweisbe@wisc.edu>

Nancy Winton 274-6431

Troy Reeves, Head of UW-Madison Archives’ Oral History Program, is an additional resource person. He has stated that his program will work to answer questions or provide any help possible to those interested in starting an oral history/memoirs project. He may be reached at 608 890-1899 <treeves@library.wisc.edu>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

An Introduction to SAIL’s Personal Memoirs Project	Pages 1 and 2
Interviewing Hints from the Personal Memoirs Project Group	Page 3
Technical Notes and Basic Steps	Page 4
Selected Community Resources, Web Sites, and Bibliography	Page 5
SAIL Permission-For-Use Form	Page 6
Public Radio’s Story Corps Do-It-Yourself Guide	Pages 7 and 8

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PRE-INTERVIEW

Purpose: To get comfortable and familiar with each other; this is a rapport-building session.

Encourage interviewee to think ahead about what they want to cover, for example a specific time or event in their life, someone they knew, a life review, their experience of an important historical period, event, or movement. Think about the focus. If needed, consider such questions as: Persons of influence in their life. Obstacles they overcame, challenges they met. Events that changed their life direction.

Don't start the stories now.

Review the process and equipment operation.

POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Practice **sensitive, active listening** and how to ask questions and be responsive during the interview. Avoid closed-ended questions (those with only yes/no or short answer), preferably use open-ended questions (those that lead to an elaboration or full story). Aim for **increased depth** with the questions.

Use such open-ended questions as Why? Will you describe that? How did you feel? What were your thoughts at the time? The interviewer should be neutral, not reveal bias or preferences. The interviewer should avoid interjecting unnecessary comments or saying "uh huh."

The **focus** will determine the kinds of questions the interviewer prepares ahead. The interviewee could be encouraged to think about relevant questions also. Some examples are:

"Tell me the story of _____"

"How do you think that event shaped your life?"

"How did this experience influence you/your values?"

"How was this experience significant to you?"

"Tell me more about that."

"How did you feel about that?"

"Have you added all you wanted to about this subject?"

TECHNOLOGY NOTES and BASIC STEPS

Digital recordings are recommended.

If quality equipment is used, sound can be excellent and the equipment should be easy to use. Copying and transferring to CDs, web sites, power point presentations, e-mail attachments, iPods and other places will require additional technical and computer skills. Be aware that recordings on tape and older types of digital recorders are already becoming obsolete.

Read the manual which comes with the recorder and then practice using the equipment. Before each interview, test to make sure the recorder is working properly. A common problem is volume that is set too low. Set the volume so that you are recording as loudly as possible without distortions or excess background noise. Use the equipment in a quiet room.

At the beginning of each interview, be sure to state the following information: interview date and place, name of the interviewer and name of person being interviewed (including spelling of names), date and place of birth of person being interviewed.

The basic steps of the recording process are:

- 1) Record the interview using the digital recorder following the instructions that come with it.
- 2) When the interview is completed, the interviewer or interviewee transfers the recorder file onto a computer and saves it.
- 3) The file in the computer is then transferred (burned) to an audio CD. A CD-R is used because it has high compatibility with standard CD readers (such as a car CD player, stereo set, or a computer). Your CD may not work on every CD player. If you have a problem, try a different CD player.

The above process can be difficult without familiarity with the correct computer program, types of file formats, how to burn CDs and so forth. SAIL and the Personal Memoirs Project Group will try to help you complete the process, upon request.

Back Ups are critical. It is important to keep a copy of the original recorded interview.

If you decide to edit or "clean up" the digitally recorded interview, be sure to keep a copy of the original unedited digital file. If you choose to work with a SAIL volunteer interviewer, SAIL will create one CD-R for you and also maintain a back up record for one year should additional copies be desired in the future.

SAIL members are encouraged to authorize SAIL to deposit their reminiscences as part of a SAIL members collection with the Wisconsin Historical Society or a similar repository. See Permission-to-use Form at Page 6.

SELECTED COMMUNITY RESOURCES, WEB SITES, and BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. For schedule and other information about OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute)-PLATO and other UW Extension/Continuing Education classes on written reminiscences, contact 608 262-5823 <www.seniorlearning.wisc.edu>
2. MATC offers courses relevant to our memoirs project at various locations including area Senior Centers. For further information, contact 608 246-6100 <www.matcmadison.edu/matc>.
3. A FIELD NOTEBOOK FOR ORAL HISTORY (4th edition, revised by Troy Reeves) contains valuable practical information (such as framing interview questions) and an extensive bibliography. A copy is available at SAIL's office and may be borrowed by SAIL members.
4. Two recommended books on oral history are:
DOING ORAL HISTORY (2nd ed.) by Donald Ritchie
ORAL HISTORY MANUAL by Mary Quinlan and Barb Sommer
5. Some Professionals Available for Oral Histories and Related Services:

Anita Hecht, LIFE HISTORY SERVICES - 608 255-9669 www.lifehistoryservices.com
<info@lifehistoryservices.com>

Judy Pierotti, VOICE TREASURES - 608 283-6353
<jwpierotti@ameritech.net>

Cheryl Schwarzenbart, GENERATION TO GENERATION (Photo Memories) -608 849-6979
<familyties2@charter.net>

Stephen Busalacchi (author of WHITE COAT WISDOM, a volume of interviews with doctors talking about what they do and how they got there)
<www.pdrsteve.com> (click on "Family History Interviews")

Sarah White periodically offers Reminiscence Writing workshops at Senior Centers in Monona, Madison, and particularly Fitchburg (270-4290).
6. A useful website with many links to topics such as "50 questions for Family History Interviews," "Oral History Step-By-Step," and "Getting Nosy with Aunt Rosie" is www.geneology.about.com/cs/oralhistory/a/interviews
7. Another website with practical information about interviewing people to record personal reminiscences is: www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/index.php?id=23560

PERMISSION-FOR-USE FORM
SAIL'S PERSONAL MEMOIRS PROJECT

SAIL

Supporting Active independent Living
6201 Mineral Point Road
Madison, WI 53705
info@sailtoday.org

I, _____, hereby give permission to SAIL to make a copy of my Personal Profiles Project interview(s), recorded on _____.
I understand I will receive my copy of the interview(s) as a standard audio CD unless I have made other arrangements.

Narrator/Interviewee INITIAL as appropriate:

1) _____ I hereby authorize SAIL to retain a copy of my interview(s) for educational and historical purposes, for one year as a back-up to make additional copies, and to deposit a copy as part of a SAIL membership collection with the Wisconsin Historical Society or a similar public or non-profit repository.

OR

2) _____ A copy of my interview(s) may be released only to me or to the person I designate in writing.

My permission is subject to the following restrictions:

Signature of Narrator/ Interviewee

Signature of Interviewer

Address of Narrator/Interviewee

Address of Interviewer

Birth Year/Birthplace

Site/City of Interview

Date of Agreement

StoryCorps® national day of listening

Do-It-Yourself Guide

This Thanksgiving, StoryCorps asks you to start a new holiday tradition - set aside one hour on Friday, November 28th, to record a conversation at home. Choose a loved one to interview, then borrow or use your own recording equipment. There's no wrong way to do it. Just listen closely, and ask the questions you've always wanted to ask. Here's how.

1. Pick a Storyteller

Start by deciding whom you want to interview. A beloved relative? A mentor? A local hero? Some people may be hesitant to participate; emphasize how important that person's story is to you and how you think it is worth preserving for the future. Let him or her know that you would be honored to record the conversation.

2. Create a List of Questions

Preparing ahead of time will greatly improve the quality of your interview. Think about what you would like to learn from your partner, then make a list of 5-10 questions. Here are some questions that have led to great conversations:

- What are some of the most important lessons you have learned in life?
- What are you most proud of?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Is there something about yourself that you think no one knows?
- How would you like to be remembered?

For more suggested questions, visit www.storycorps.net and use our online Question Generator.

3. Purchase or Borrow Recording Equipment

The recording equipment can be as simple as a tape recorder, a video camera, or a computer. You can find both basic and more sophisticated recording equipment at your local electronics store or for purchase online. You might even borrow equipment from a friend or relative. Whatever recording equipment you choose, we strongly suggest that you practice with it before your interview.

4. Choose an Interview Location

Pick the quietest place possible. A carpeted room is best. Be sure to turn the volume off on any TV, radio, or stereo. Close the door and listen for anything else that's making noise: buzzing fluorescent lights, ticking clocks, air conditioners, etc. If possible, turn them off or move them out of the room. Avoid kitchens, which have reflective surfaces and noisy appliances. Listen for noise during the interview as well. If your storyteller fiddles with a necklace, for example, feel free to tell him or her if the microphone picks up the sound. Make the space as peaceful as possible by turning the lights low.

5. Set Up and Test the Equipment

Set up your equipment as early as possible before the interview and make sure you know how to use it. Once the interview starts you will be able to focus on your interview partner and not the equipment. Before the interview, record your storyteller answering a few throwaway questions, such as, "Tell me what you had for breakfast." Stop, rewind, and listen to the sample recording to determine if everything is working. Remember to press RECORD again when you begin the actual interview.

A few tips for better audio quality:

- If possible, wear headphones when recording. Your headphones are your "ears" for the interview; they tell you exactly what you'll hear on your finished recording.
- If possible, use a microphone when recording. Always hold the microphone in your hand, moving it between you and your storyteller. Hold the microphone about 7 inches from your storyteller's mouth. If you're using an internal microphone on a camera, set up the camera just far enough away to keep the picture in focus.
- Be careful of "mic-handling" noise. That's the low, rumbling sound you hear when you move the microphone in your hands. Use a light touch when handling the microphone, and minimize movement.

Do-It-Yourself Guide

6. Begin the Conversation

Start the interview by stating your name, your age, the date, and the location of the interview. For example, "My name is Marissa Martinez. I'm forty years old. The date is November 28, 2008, and I'm sitting with my grandfather, Frank Jackson, in his living room in Hamilton, Missouri." Then ask your storyteller to do the same.

Remember, the questions you prepared in advance are just suggestions. Trust your instincts and ask questions in whatever order feels right. If something interests you, ask more about it. Sometimes your storyteller may need to know that it's okay to talk about a certain topic. Grant permission by saying, "Tell me more." Take breaks if your storyteller needs them. Avoid saying "uh huh" or interrupting. Instead, use visual cues like nodding your head to encourage the storyteller to keep going.

7. Keep the Conversation Flowing

Listen closely. Look your storyteller in the eyes. Nod your head. Smile. Stay engaged.

Stick with the good stuff. Try to keep to the topics that move you. If the current topic isn't what you wanted to put on tape, gently steer the conversation in another direction.

Ask emotional questions. Asking "How does this make you feel?" often elicits interesting responses. Don't be afraid to ask.

Respect your subject. If there is a topic that your interview partner does not want to talk about, respect his or her wishes and move on.

Take notes during the interview. Write down questions or stories you might want to return to later.

Be curious and honest, and keep an open heart. Great things will happen.

8. Wrap It Up

Before you turn off the recorder, ask the storyteller if there is anything else that he or she wants to talk about. Then make sure to thank the person; opening up can be difficult. Express your gratitude, and let him or her know that it was a privilege to listen to the story.

Finally, hit STOP on your recorder. Congratulations! You have just participated in the National Day of Listening.

9. Preserve and Share the Conversation

Start your own archive at home by labeling the interview properly and storing it in a safe place.

The recording is likely to become a treasured family heirloom. If you can, make copies of the interview to distribute to friends and relatives. Invite loved ones to your home to listen to the recording and talk about it. Bring it to special occasions, reunions, or memorials.

Although StoryCorps cannot include Do-It-Yourself interviews in our archive, you have the option of uploading and sharing your interview online at www.nationaldayoflistening/#share. Be sure to read all terms and conditions before uploading your file.

For more information about conducting your own interview, including technical advice and sample questions, visit www.storycorps.net/tools.

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