

Oral Interview Guidelines
by Susan D. Walter

The hope of SBHS is that we will collect the stories of our beloved elders, and any of those who have stories to tell about our region. Many people want to do this, but feel lost or overwhelmed, and unable to even start. I have done oral interviews professionally. This is what I do: You may find things here that work for you or they may not – the point is to get started! (Skip to end of these instructions for the easy way.)

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1. RELEASE FORM

You should start with a RELEASE FORM. This gives you permission to use the information. I recommend that you include a sentence that the informant does NOT lose the right to use their own information in any way they want; some people are leery about that. Both parties MUST include contact information. I include my own name, title, address, phone and email as a header. Take two copies with you in case there is no copy machine where the interview takes place. Be sure BOTH parties fill out BOTH copies and that BOTH parties get a copy of the agreement. There is a table at the bottom; one or the other is checked to indicate who got that copy. Some people say it isn't necessary; I say it IS. It protects everyone, and might keep family members from fighting...

Below is an example of the RELEASE FORM that I use:

WALTER ENTERPRISES
Susan D. Walter, Principal
238 Second Avenue, Chula Vista, CA 91910-2927
(619) 426-5109 sdwalter@cox.net

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

I/we (PRINTED name of Interviewee/s), _____
do hereby give, convey and assign the information contained in the following interview(s)
recorded on the date(s) below as an unrestricted gift and transfer to Walter Enterprises, for
archiving, legal title and literary property rights including copyright.

I/we (Interviewee/s) _____ understand that Walter
Enterprises will use the oral interview and the information contained within, for historical and
scholarly purposes.

If a transcript is produced, the Interviewee/s will be given a draft copy of it. The
Interviewee/s may correct the draft transcript. Corrections will need to be returned to Walter
Enterprises within two (2) weeks to be included as a final document.

We both (Interviewer and Interviewee/s) also understand that the tapes and/or
transcripts may be archived at a recognized facility.

It is further understood that by signing this document the Interviewee/s is/are not
restricted from personal use or publication of this information in any way.

Date(s) of Agreement: _____

Signature of Interviewer: _____

Signature of Interviewee/s: _____

CONTACTS for INTERVIEWEE/S: Phone # _____

Phone # _____

Email: _____

Address: _____

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Walter Enterprises Copy | | Interviewee/'s Copy |
| | | |

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2. PEDIGREE

I have a short questionnaire for people's names and so on to help with spelling. I try to get them to fill it out before I come to do the actual interview. Here is an example:

Susan D. Walter
WALTER ENTERPRISES
238 Second Avenue, Chula Vista, CA 91910-2927
(619) 426-5109 sdwalter@cox.net

Oral interview PEDIGREE

Date of interview _____

NOTES:

1. Be brief (but you can also use the back or additional pages if you wish)
2. The **bolded** items will be asked during the interview, and the rest may be also. Please indicate if you do NOT want to answer any of these questions. You may also leave anything blank.
3. Filling this out helps the transcriptionist who is working from a tape recording or videotape to spell things correctly.

| check | # | Question | Interviewee's answer & use back of page if needed |
|-------|---|---|---|
| | 1 | your name (first, middle, last, maiden) | |
| | 2 | nickname | |
| | 3 | your birth date | |
| | 4 | town and state where you were born | |
| | 5 | were you adopted? | |
| | 6 | your mother's full name (including her maiden name) | |
| | 7 | where your mother was born | |

| | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| 8 | your mother's work | |
| 9 | your father's full name | |
| 10 | where your father was born | |
| 11 | your father's work | |
| 12 | were you raised by a step parent? | |
| 13 | do you have any step or half siblings? | |
| 14 | your siblings names (oldest first to youngest; include yourself) | |
| 15 | your spouse/partners name | |
| 16 | your spouse/partner's birth date | |
| 17 | previous spouse/partner's name | |
| 18 | list your children's names, oldest to youngest | |
| 19 | your step children's names, oldest to youngest | |
| 20 | are any of your children adopted? | |
| 21 | other people living with your family who are/were important to you? | |
| 22 | names of friends who hung out with you | |
| 23 | when did you first arrive here? | |
| 24 | how did you get here? | |
| 25 | what was your first impression of the area? | |
| 26 | where did you live? | |
| 27 | subjects you particularly want to tell about | |

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3. MAP

I often bring a map of the area and ask the informant to mark the places described in the interview. I have them use a marking pen. I give them bright colors like red, purple, blue, green or other color(s) as needed so their writing shows up easily. Big, legible notations are wonderful!!!

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4. PROCEED TO INTERVIEW

I recommend taping or otherwise recording the informant. This way, your interpretations are not left to memory or your own illegible notes. It is especially important if you are going to produce the all important TRANSCRIPT (more about this later).

I always go with a list of the questions / subjects I really want answered. I am particularly interested in those people whose lives are not ordinarily detailed. Here is an example of what I ask homemakers:

HOMEMAKER QUESTIONS

(Did this woman ever work outside the home?)

Did you have a weekly routine that you followed?

IE: shopping, laundry, cleaning on a particular day of the week?

How was doing laundry different than now?

How was cleaning the house different than now?

How was cooking different than now?

Shopping

Where did you go for your grocery shopping?

Did you go with a list, or did you buy things on sale?

Where did you find out what was on sale?

Did you meet with friends or relatives to go shopping together?

Where did you buy clothes for your family?

Yourself?

Your husband?

Your children?

Did you go window shopping as a pastime with friends or family?

Where?

Do you remember any specific "wish I could have that" displays?

Did you order things from catalogues?

Which catalogues?

Cooking

Did you know how to cook prior to getting married?

Who taught you?

Did you take home economics classes in high school?

Did your husband ever cook meals?

Did your family have a regular menu during the week (chicken on Sunday, etc.?)

Did that change during war time?

What were some of the favorite things your family ate?

Did you make "economy meals"?

What was your specialty that you took to potlucks and get togethers?

Sewing

Who taught you to sew?

Did you sew clothes for your family?

Did you ever make costumes for you children (Halloween, plays at school, etc.)?

Did you teach your children to sew?

Tell me about it –

Babies and Childcare

Did you have experience with young children prior to getting married?

Can you tell me what it was like to be pregnant?

Did your husband help you during your pregnancy(ies)?

Did you have a baby shower?

Tell me who was there and what you did.

Who was present when you delivered your baby(ies)?

How long did you stay in the hospital?

Which hospital?

Any details or stories about getting there, leaving, the stay?

Did you have a nursery set up when you came home?

Did you have anyone give you advice about childcare?

Did you have babysitters?

What were their names?

How did you find them?

Did you pay them?

Did you share childcare duties with other mothers?

Who were friends with your children?

At what age were they friends?

Did your children take extracurricular lessons, like music or dance lessons?

Did your children participate in sports activities outside of school (Little League, etc.)?

Did your children join in any extracurricular clubs (4H, youth groups, etc.)?

What kind of work did your husband do?

What specifically did your husband do at work?

Did he like his work?

Did his work impact you personally?

Did you attend Christmas parties and other similar events at his work?

Did he bring home the boss, associates, or friends from work?

Did he meet his workmates in social settings that you were not invite to?

When he got paid, who handled the paycheck?

Did you get an allowance to run the household with?

What was your husband's attitude toward working women?

How did he feel about you going to work?

What did you do when your husband was at work and your children in school?

Did you visit with family or neighbors?

Who were your neighbors?

Did you have other friends you met with?

Did you belong to any women's groups or clubs?

Were you an officer?

What types of activities did you participate in?

Who were some of the other members?

Church

What church did you attend?

Did you belong to church groups?

Were you an officer?

What types of activities did you participate in?

Who were some of the other members?

Did your church associate with other churches?

Schools

Did you participate in school activities such as PTA, school plays, or other volunteering?

Which schools?

Tell me about it –

Did your kids ever get in trouble in school?

How was it handled at school?

How was it addressed at home?

Were you the primary disciplinarian?

Was your husband the primary disciplinarian?

Hobbies

Did you read for pleasure?

Did you go to the public library?

Subscribe to book clubs, newspapers or magazines?

What hobbies, or other pastimes did you enjoy?

Did you collect things?

Did you garden?

Fashions

Were changing fashions in clothing and hairstyles important to you?

Can you describe an event (party, prom, etc.) where you felt particularly glamorous?

What did your dress look like?

Accessories?

Where did you get it?

Holidays

New Years

Valentines Day

Sadie Hawkins Day

Easter

May Day

Arbor Day

Washingtons Birthday

Lincolns Birthday

July 4th

Labor Day

Memorial Day

Halloween

Thanksgiving

Christmas

Birthdays, how did you celebrate them?

Other?

Voting

Did you vote?

Did you ever work in the polls?

How do you think life for the homemaker was different during your life than how it is now?

How has Chula Vista changed?

Ethnic groups?

Physically?

Can you tell me the differences in elderly persons' lives when you were young and yours now?

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Remember also to GO WITH THE FLOW!

Your comments aren't the focus here, if your interviewee veers off, it may include gems. If it becomes rambling, you can edit out the unnecessary parts.

As you can see in the RELEASE FORM, I give the informant a copy of the DRAFT TRANSCRIPT. He or she can change it in any way. If pieces are to be changed, deleted, added, I do it. Sometimes I have questioned whether they want information to become public, or clarification.

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FORMAT for THE TRANSCRIPT

My format for the transcript is:

Margins: left 8 spaces (to accommodate 3 hole punch), the other three margins are 5 spaces (to save paper). Pages are numbered at the upper right hand corner.

Finals are with the full names of the people speaking, in the initial entry, following entries may be abbreviated. (In the Harbison / Wright / White / Walter example, the names were so confusing I preferred to keep them throughout the document.) Finals are in 14 point for ease of reading, single spaced for speech, and skip a space when the speaker changes.

At the beginning, I include an Introductory page describing the procedure, which includes this information: Who was interviewed, the name of the interviewer, anyone else present whether they speak or not, where it occurred, the date it was done, type of equipment used. Also, why the interview was done, and mentioning an addendum at the end that lists the number of cassettes, videos, photographs, items contributed by the informant, and where they are archived. (See Example #3 below.)

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5. TRANSCRIPT

Example #1:

Interview with Robert Harbison and Barbara Harbison Wright
2-22-08

Susan Walter = This is Susan Walter, and the date is February 22, 2008. There are five of us, and we are sitting in the kitchen of the Stein Farm Museum. I'd like everybody to introduce yourselves. Your name is –

Robert Harbison = Robert Fulton Harbison.

Susan Walter = And you are –

Dan White = Dan White.

Susan Walter = And you are –

Barbara Wright = Barbara Wright.

Susan Walter = And you are –

Betty White = Betty White.

Susan Walter = White and Wright. Thank you. And the reason that we're here is because the Harbison and Wright people used to live across the street from the Stein Farm. Is that correct?

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Example #2:

DRAFT
Interview with Evaline Simmons
January 15, 2008

Susan Walter: This is Susan Walter, and I am interviewing Evaline Simmons. The date is January 15, 2008. We are in the dining room area of her home in Bonita. What was your full name?

Evaline Simmons: Evaline Elizabeth Eulitt Simmons.

SW: What kind of name is Eulitt?

ES: I understand it's French.

SW: Do you have any nicknames?

ES: No.

SW: (So) everybody calls you Evaline. Where were you born?

ES: In National City.

SW: Whereabouts in National City?

ES: In Dr. Owens' house – it was on National Boulevard, National City Boulevard.

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This is the INTRODUCTORY PAGE I used for one of my projects:
Example #3:

**Escondido Historical Society Oral Interview Transcript:
BEULAH RUNGE**

Procedure:

For the Escondido Historical Society's Oral History project, Susan Walter interviewed Beulah Runge on October 5, 2001, in the living room of her home in Escondido. No one else contributed to the interview. Recording equipment consisted of a Sony cassette-corder, which doubles the length of a tape cassette. The tape recording was transcribed by Doris Nelson. Susan Walter edited the transcript.

Note: The transcript is not completely verbatim. "Um hm", "uh uh" and similar sounds have been turned to "yes" and "no". Pauses, changes in direction of thought, and some wording has been deleted to make the information clear. Words inside parentheses () are added to complete a sentence. Later additions from the informant are in brackets [] or footnotes. Sections not pertinent to the interview are not included.

Paper copies of the final transcript went to the Escondido Historical Society, and the interviewee. A floppy disk is archived at both the Escondido Historical Society and the Pioneer Room of the Escondido Public Library. An addendum sheet attached to the end of the transcript lists additional items included from the interview; those items are housed at the Pioneer Room.

BR = Beulah Runge
SW = Susan Walter

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This is the ADDENDUM sheet, listing what was included and where it went:
Example #4:

Escondido Historical Society Oral Interview

ADDENDUM

Name of subject: Beulah Runge
Interviewed by: Susan Walter
Date: October 5, 2001

The following items were included with the original of this transcript. They are archived at:

Escondido Public Library
 Pioneer Room
 247 South Kalmia St.
 Escondido, CA 92025

(760) 839-4315

| | ITEM | NOTES |
|--|--|---|
| | 2 cassette tapes | The recordings were taped at half speed in order to avoid numerous changing of tapes. Tapes have recordings ONLY on the side with the label attached. |
| | 1 color photograph of the subject | taken by Susan Walter |
| | Floppy diskette | The diskette contains 20 transcripts of the City of Escondido Oral History project. Copies of the diskette are located at both the Escondido Historical Society Archives, and the Pioneer Room of The Escondido Public Library. |
| | Release form – Escondido Historical Society | |
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OK? Worried? Think you may blow it? Well:

"EVERY LIFE HAS A STORY"

"MYTHS HAVE A KERNAL OF TRUTH"

YOU are interesting. Mistakes happen, see Column 1.

You ARE interesting. Assumptions may occur because of mistakes, see Column 2.

You are INTERESTING. And you may be the person who can make history right, see Column 3.

| 1. MISCONCEPTION BECAUSE | 2. ASSUMPTION | 3. REALITY |
|-----------------------------|---------------|------------|
| EXAMPLE | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Susan says: My aunt and cousins told me our Grandmother was elected May Queen when she was a senior at Vassar College. | That my aunt, Grandma Billie's daughter, knew what she was talking about. She had also told the story to her daughters, my cousins. | You heard the tape recording. She was elected May Queen, but in high school. This also explained the confusion of the historian at Vassar when I spoke to her and she could find no record of that. I had put together information that is now, I know, wrong. I've corrected it but know the wrong detail is "still out there." My lesson is that we are all fallible, and you can just hope for the best. But, also I am very forgiving of other people's mistakes as well. |
| Susan says: My house was built in 1890 by a man named John M. Davidson. In the voting records of him he was described as "6 feet tall, brown eyes, iron grey hair, and DARK SKIN." [emphasis mine] | That JM Davidson was a hearty farmer when living at my home here in Chula Vista. | After I received his Civil War pension, I found out he never really saw action. His first 24 hours was a forced march through freezing rain and sleet in January, followed by sleeping in the open with no shelter in sippy mud. He got sick. It resulted in a severe liver ailment that tormented him throughout his life. FROM JAUNDICE, HIS SKIN WAS DARK YELLOW, which was what the poll worker had described. He also had no teeth, and was very short sighted. So much for being a hearty farmer. |
| You don't tell your stories | That your life was uninteresting. | HA! No grandchild, no child ever is not curious about their family. Just look at the records of adopted children trying to find all their family history. Their family history is even more complex than ordinarily structured families. (Maybe.) |
| You make a mistake in your recollections, details fuzzy or skewed in some way. | Your family will believe something that is incorrect UNTIL someone uncovers the correct version. | SO WHAT? The point here is to start. If there is some detail incorrect, the point is that just a beginning helps! (See all above.) |
| "They told me..." | You believe them... | FIX it if you don't know, say so. Or say "I was told that..." |

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And this above is too DAUNTING? Do it in pieces:

When my Grandma told me stories I wrote them down and had her edit them, which she did ferociously. My original has highlighted places for her spelling corrections.

After Vienna, I went on to my cousins, (now) Admiral Hans Eyer and his wife Clara and their “children” who I had known in 1910 at Kiel. Inge, a year younger than I, Adalbert, studying law at the University in Berlin, and 16 year old Hans, still in school. They had a big apt. in Zehlendorf, a suburb of Berlin. I stayed for a month with them. I went to several dances with the young people. I had a funny experience at the big “West Marken Ball” to raise money for much needed charity. After one dance, my partner learned that I was an American. He stopped in the middle of the floor and glared at me. “But then,” he cried in German “we are enemies” (feinde) and he stalked off and left me standing there!

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IN MY HUMBLE OPINION...

The most IMPORTANT part of an oral interview is the TRANSCRIPT. Your notes will be confusing, and sometimes illegible. And they get lost, or shuffled, or wet or thrown away. A tape recorder, video recorder, ANY electronic device will become OBSOLETE. In dozens of my interviews, I used a standard cassette recorder (usually) but now both tape recorders and cassettes are difficult to buy. “Floppy disks”??? I was so proud of them, but they aren’t useful now. The high tech camera we had, using videocassettes no longer exist; the machinery to play them is obsolete, and they are difficult or impossible to repair. An old fashioned, PRINTED ON PAPER document, archived at a library or “accepted facility” does not depend on machinery and if nothing else is the best backup possible. Anyone can read it, anytime, and copy it.

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THE END

But MOST OF ALL: Just do it! Get those stories. If you don’t feel up to the formal stuff above, interview, type it up, and you’ve done more than many people do. If it’s just “Hey Dad, what was it like when you were a kid?” ... Fabulous!