

## ***ORAL HISTORIES KIT***

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## ***Tips for Collecting Oral Histories***

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### **Before You Begin**

First, no matter how hard you try, you will never record the entire body of existing A.A. experience. Don't despair. Record what you can and encourage other members to do the same. Just think of collecting A.A. history and folklore as a pastime for which you have an infinite supply of raw material close at hand.

In making the initial contact with a prospective interviewee, be certain to make a clear presentation of the purpose and nature of the interview. One need not give lengthy explanations but should inform the interviewee of the time investment involved, of the general areas to be covered, how the interview will be conducted and what will be done with the tape/transcript, how it will be used and for what purposes. Being explicit and direct with the prospective interviewee inspires confidence in the oral history endeavor.

### **Pre-Interview Preparation**

The interviewer should have sound knowledge of A.A. in the local area. The interviewer may wish to do background reading and research before the interview, consulting *The Grapevine* Digital Archive, old Conference and assembly reports, area or district newsletters, directories, etc. Without any background the interviewer cannot ask the types of questions that will elicit the most pertinent information possessed by the interviewee. Sufficient preparation spells the difference between a valuable and a poor interview.

Before the interview, you may wish to give the interviewee a list of topics you might cover, in addition to a biographical sketch for the interviewee to fill out. These materials, given a week or so in advance of the actual interview will stimulate an interviewee's memories. But indicate that any other related topics which he or she can think of will be useful for the interview.

Set-up arrangements should include a location in a quiet place where there won't be interruptions. The interviewee's home--familiar territory--usually enhances the session. Arrange a date and time and telephone the day before to remind the person of the session.

### **The Equipment**

You will want to use a tape recorder, mini-disc recorder, or portable CD recorder to record an oral history interview. There are a number of recorders available, and each has its benefits and drawbacks. The G.S.O. Archives can provide guidance as to which recorder to purchase. A local library or historical society may loan this kind of equipment.

Although both you and your informant might be uneasy and uncomfortable with a tape recorder, you will soon become accustomed to its presence. A small, portable device with a built-in omni-

directional microphone will give the best results. The equipment should be easy to use and so inconspicuous that its presence will soon be forgotten. You should use a disk or tape that will allow at least 60-90 minutes of recording. The microphone should be placed so that all voices, including yours, can be picked up.

Run a test before you begin the actual interview and adjust the machine accordingly. The end of a two-hour interview is no time to discover that you've forgotten to push the record button or that the volume control was incorrectly adjusted! Read carefully any instructions that come with the particular tape recorder that you are using. Your own confidence in the equipment and the ease with which you go about setting it up in the presence of the interviewee all convey a sense of comfortableness and matter-of-factness which diminish stage-fright and allay anxiety.

As far as possible all extraneous noise should be eliminated. Turn off the radio, close the windows, and move away from air conditioners or fans. A few minutes spent finding the proper spot for the tape recorder can save you many hours when it comes time to transcribe the interview and you struggle to distinguish a voice from the roar of a passing airplane. The recorder should also be placed where it will not be disturbed during the interview and where you will have easy access to it when it becomes necessary to change tapes.

Although not as essential as a tape recorder, a camera is a useful piece of equipment. It provides a visual record of the interview and the informant. It can also be used to copy any documentary records that the informant might offer, such as photographs or scrapbooks.

Note-taking is discouraged. Writing during an interview has a number of disadvantages. Most people find note-taking to be both tedious and difficult. It is hard to maintain a conversation or participate actively in the ongoing activities. Visual contact is lost. A complete, accurate account of the story -- especially if is long and detailed -- is difficult to obtain. However, taking a few notes is okay if it is not too distracting: one can jot down names and places where the spelling is uncertain and ask for correct spellings at the conclusion of the session. Jotting down questions which come up unexpectedly, can contribute to accuracy and thoroughness.

Remember to take along paper and pens; extra cassette tapes; batteries; an extension cord; question outline and necessary research materials. Label the tapes in advance with the narrator's name, date, address, and the interviewer's name.

## **The People**

Ideally, the first person that you interview should be someone with whom you feel very comfortable. Interviewing is not easy and you would do well to get your introduction to it in the presence of a friendly face.

As you continue your interviewing you will pick up clues that will help you find potential narrators. Whenever possible ask directly for sources: "Can you tell me who might know more about that?" Don't neglect non-members, either. Spouses and children can often be wonderful sources of information, and sometimes can enhance an interview by sitting in during the discussion – they can offer suggestions, fill in memory gaps, and reveal points of view that can greatly add to the depth of the interview.

In some cases it is also advisable to interview a group of longtimers together – a sponsor and sponsee, a group of men who started a group together or got sober together, friends who have been in the same group for decades, etc. These kinds of interviews can be very fun and informative. The interaction that occurs as a matter of course serves to spark the memories of the participants. One story leads into another, one interpretation elicits cries of "but that's not really the way it happened at all!" The end result of such an interview will differ greatly from private interviews with the same individuals.

## **The Interview**

Every interview that you do will be unique. The following questions will supply some uniformity, although you will probably be selective in using them. The following brief suggestions should be helpful in most circumstances.

1. Ask evocative questions. Nothing can kill an interview faster than a long series of questions that require only yes or no answers.
2. Recognize that there will be some information that you will not get. The interviewee may simply not trust you with some sensitive information.
3. Rather than being just a friend or fellow member, you are becoming an interrogator. Both you and your informant may feel uneasy in these new roles. A low key approach in a natural setting should help relieve some of the discomfort.
4. Show interest. Encourage your informants as much as possible. Interject remarks whenever appropriate. Take an active part in the conversation without dominating it. Learn to be a good listener as well as a good questioner.
5. Know what questions you want to ask, but don't be afraid to let your informant go off on a tangent. He or she might touch on subjects of interest that you never thought to ask about.

6. Do not be so absorbed with preserving the past that you neglect to record the present. Keep your eyes, ears, and mind open. A memory or tradition does not have to be old to be worth recording.
7. In collecting A.A. oral histories, note that too much is often better than too little. Tapes can be edited and transcripts can be discarded, but the tradition, story or expression that you neglect to record today may exist only in memory next week.
8. Never turn off the tape recorder unless asked to. Not only does it break the conversation, such action suggests that you think some of your informant's material is not worth recording.
9. Use props whenever possible. Documents, letters, photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies and other heirlooms can all be profitably used to stimulate memories.
10. Be sensitive to the needs of the interviewee. Schedule your sessions at a convenient time. Older people may tire easily - cut the interview off at the first sign of fatigue. Don't slight any A.A. members who show interest in your project; interview them. Each interview should be a pleasant and rewarding experience for all parties involved.
11. If possible, prepare some sort of written report for the group, district, or area as a tangible result of their participation. Remember to save all of your tapes, notes and any other documentation that you have accumulated. *Label everything with names, dates and places.* Ideally, all tapes should be indexed and transcribed. You will be more conscientious about documentation if you place yourself in the position of the A.A. member who, many decades in the future, will be using your project as a source of inspiration and recovery.

## **Ethical and Legal Considerations**

Most A.A. members will be delighted by your interest in collecting their histories. Unfortunately, a few may be uncooperative and even hostile. Because of the personal nature of the stories that you will be collecting, you should be especially careful to preserve anonymity at the level of the public media, and in all other ways, protect the privacy and rights of all involved.

Be honest about your intent from the very beginning. Explain your reasons for doing the recordings. Do you simply want to record the stories for posterity? Do you plan to publish your findings? Do you plan to make copies of the tapes, post interviews online, or in any other way make them available to other A.A. members? The ultimate disposition of the collection may affect their willingness to talk about certain subjects.

Don't make promises you can't or don't intend to keep. If you say that you will erase part of a tape, do so, even if it means losing some important information. Respect confidences and privacy. Let your informants see anything that will be published before it is too late to alter the manuscript. The intimate nature of these oral histories places burdens on the researcher that are restrictive and sometimes frustrating, but the rights of the interviewee must be respected.

Do have the interviewee sign a release form. Oral history involves interviewing individuals on a voluntary basis with the explicit intention of creating a historical document that will be preserved (generally in the form of the audio recording as well as the transcription of what was spoken) for the use of future researchers. By means of a simple release form, the interviewer insures both the integrity and continuity of an oral history project and safeguards each interviewee's rights. A sample release form is available from the G.S.O.

### **Transcribing and/or Indexing Oral History Tapes**

Creating verbatim transcription of tapes is ideal, but these are incredible time consuming; in general, one hour of tape-recorded interview equals approximately 50 pages of typescript, and 8-12 hours of labor. Because of this, you may choose to provide detailed indexes for each tape rather than transcriptions. A subject index for each tape, and an ongoing general index for a collection of taped memoirs, is an acceptable alternative for making oral history collections usable. Take care to record any names used on the tape, especially if any A.A. member is identified by first and last name, as an aid to preserving anonymity if the tape is ever to be released widely.

By using the digital counter found on most tape recorders the indexer can indicate with approximate accuracy the location on the tape of a certain portion of discussion on each topic covered in the interview.

### **In Conclusion**

Please do not be discouraged by all the do's and don'ts that have been outlined thus far. These guidelines are based on common sense and the recommendations of practiced oral historians and genealogists, but that doesn't mean that all of them will work for you. Vary them to suit your own family circumstances. Improve them with our blessing and encouragement. And above all, enjoy yourself.

## ***Sample Introductory Letter to Interviewee***

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*When reaching out to potential oral history candidates, sometimes it is useful to send an introductory letter describing your project and the reasons you are requesting an interview. This template may be adapted and used as this kind of introduction.*

Date

Address

Dear

Warm greetings from the [area or district] Archives.

Please excuse the intrusion of my letter. In my role as [service position], I am embarking on a project to conduct oral histories with many significant figures in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. We would like to add to our archives collection through a new project of interviewing A.A.s and friends of A.A. to capture their memories of the organization.

Therefore I would like to request an opportunity to record your memories of A.A. and your work with the Fellowship. An interview with you would greatly add to our collections and to the body of A.A. history. The interview would take place at a location of your choosing (your home would be fine), at a time that is convenient for you. It would take just a few hours.

If you would be willing to sit for a recorded interview with me, please just let me know. If you would like to discuss it further, you are welcome to call me any time. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Very best wishes,

Name



## ***Oral History Biographical Sketch***

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*Filling out this form before the interview may help the interviewer ask more appropriate and interesting questions. The interviewee shouldn't feel compelled to complete the entire form, but only those parts of it that are applicable and relevant.*

Subject's Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Family History***

Birth Date & Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Father's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Father's Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Father's Occupations \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's Occupations \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date and Place of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse's Occupations \_\_\_\_\_

Children's Names and Dates of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Education, Career, and Activities***

Primary Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Higher Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Professions (Jobs), Locations, Dates \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

A.A. Service History \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***If Applicable:***

Government Offices Held (City, County, State, National, and Dates) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Political Background (Party Affiliation, Positions Held, Dates) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Military Service (Branch, Rank, Dates) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Civic and Community Activities (Organization/Activity, Offices Held) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Religious Affiliation and Activities \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Other Pertinent Information \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Prepared By \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## *Sample Interview Questions*

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### *Before A.A.*

- Please tell me a little about your life before you found A.A. When and where were you born? What kind of childhood did you have?
- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- How did you start drinking?
- When and how did your drinking get out of control?
- When did you know you had hit bottom?

### *Recovery*

- When did you first hear of AA, and from what source?
- How and when did you get started in A.A.? When and where did you sober up? Where did you go to your first meeting? What did you think of it?
- Can you tell me about your early sobriety, your steps work, and problems you had in those first days of learning the A.A. way?
- What was AA's "reputation" in the community? How was it different from what you encountered through your initial introduction?
- What was your perception of AA's success in the general population when you were first introduced to us? How has that perception changed over time?
- Did you have a sponsor when you first came in? What type of sponsorship did you have?
- How many groups or meetings were in existence?
- Can you recall the formats used at some of these early meetings? How were they run?
- When was A.A. started in your town or area? How often were meetings held? Who were some of the people playing important roles in the formation of new groups? What else do you know about the growth of A.A. during that period of time?
- Which individuals were especially prominent in your sobriety?
- How were new members contacted? What kinds of Twelfth Step work were going on? Are there any Twelfth Step anecdotes that stick out in your mind you'd care to share?
- Would you tell me about your experiences sponsoring others? Who are some of your favorite sponsees?

*Unity – Group issues and community perception of A.A.*

- Today, Conference-Approved literature is available to help A.A. members deal with a wide variety of challenging questions. Back in the day, all you had was the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, common sense and your compassion. What did you think of the Big Book, and how often did you use it? How did early A.A.s treat newcomers? How did your group(s) treat constant slippers? Thirteenth steppers? How were people wishing to talk about multiple addictions during your meetings addressed? How about non-alcoholic drug addicts walking in off the street for their first meeting?
- We say sometimes that all that's needed to form an A.A. meeting is two drunks, a resentment and a coffeepot. Can you talk at all about the differences that led to new groups being formed in your area?
- In *A.A. Comes of Age* Bill W. writes about numerous issues over which anger and contention arose and threatened the undoing of our Fellowship. The groups nationwide, for example, did not immediately accept spiritual principles we know today as the Twelve Traditions. What controversies over issues addressed in the Traditions can you recall people wrestling with? (How were meeting spaces acquired? Was rent or other funding obtained by gambling sessions? Bingo games? How did the membership resolve these affairs?)
- Today, A.A. is well known to, and supported by, police officers, judges and corrections officials. What kind of relationship did A.A. in your area have with local authorities? How has that changed since you sobered up?
- Treatment facilities in this millennium frequently host A.A. and other Twelve Step meetings. Did treatment centers exist in your area when you sobered up? Did any of them use a Twelve Step format or incorporate meetings into their structure?
- Did you seek the cooperation of other local community or professional agencies?
- Today, radio and television public service announcements for A.A. as well as Internet web sites are becoming commonplace. When you first got sober, how did A.A.s interact with the media? Have you had any profound experiences sharing your relationship with alcohol with the public? What cautions might you have for young A.A.s today regarding media exposure?
- During the early years of your recovery, how did the community receive Alcoholics Anonymous?
- Do you think your group(s) has had an influence in your community? If so, how?

### *Service*

- How and why did you get into service work?
- What contributions did you, yourself, make to the growth of the Fellowship?
- What do you remember of early conferences, assemblies, and conventions? Can you recall opening Intergroup or central offices?
- Who made the initial outreach to you, in what manner, and in what year?
- What was actually involved in your application process?
- What were your first impressions of the active AA legacies of Recovery, Service, and Unity?
- What was your first impression of AA servants, GSO staff, Delegates? Describe your first encounters.
- What were your impressions of your first General Service Conference? What year?
- Describe some of the major decisions and Advisory Actions that involved your direct participation, and your committee activities over your years of service.
- In your memory, what particular Conference agenda items developed into Advisory Actions? Were there any that failed to gain Conference approval?
- Is there anything you regret? Any mistakes you believe you made? Any plans that failed that you wish had been successful?
- What special occasions do you recall during your time of AA service?
- How has AA changed (if it has) since you first found it?
- Do you see any particular changes in the AA fellowship and its service processes, since your start of service?
- Are there any strong similarities in the AA fellowship and its history of service, from your own service time through today?

## ***Oral History Interview Information Form***

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*This form details the scope of the oral history and provides invaluable information for future historians. Complete this form after the interview and keep it with the physical recording.*

Narrator (Interviewee) \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. and Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. and Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Length of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Cassettes or Discs \_\_\_\_\_

Oral History Release Form Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

Unrestricted \_\_\_\_ Restricted \_\_\_\_

Nature of Restrictions, if any: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcribed \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

Reviewed by Interviewee?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) No \_\_\_\_

Abstract of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ***Oral History Release Form***

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*A release of some kind, establishing ownership of rights to the interview, should be obtained from every oral history interviewee, whenever possible. This sample form may be applicable in some circumstances. It is advisable to seek legal counsel whenever embarking on a large-scale recording project.*

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of narrator), hereby give this interview recorded on \_\_\_\_\_ (insert date) to the *[include name]* Archives as a donation. With this gift, I transfer to the *[include name]* Archives legal title and all literary rights, including copyright.

I understand the interview may be made available for research and such public programming as the *[include name]* Archives may determine. This includes right and license to reproduce, copy, modify, display, distribute, perform, broadcast, transmit, and create derivatives from the recording. This may include use of the interview material in print and in live or recorded programs for radio, television, or any electronic publishing medium.

I transfer all of the above rights without limitation, to support the mission of AA and to disseminate information about AA, upon the condition that I, and any other A.A. member I identify, remain anonymous at the level of the public media.

Narrator's Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

City, State, ZIP\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer's Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

City, State, ZIP\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

## ***Sources for More Information***

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*\*Note: The G.S.O. Archives does not endorse nor affirm these web sites and publications, and has simply provided them as helpful external resources.*

### **Web sites**

Oral History Association (OHA)

<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>

Oral History Listserv

<http://www.h-net.org/~oralhist/>

Smithsonian Institution Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide, 2002.

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/InterviewingGuide.pdf>

Texas Oral History Association (TOHA)

<http://www.baylor.edu/toha/>

Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory

<http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/>

Baylor University Institute for Oral History

[http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/)

Nebraska State Historical Society “Capturing the Living Past: An Oral History Primer”

[http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral\\_history/index.htm](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral_history/index.htm)

UC Santa Cruz Oral History Primer

<http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/ohprimer.html>

Cal State University Long Beach Oral History Primer

<http://www.csulb.edu/colleges/cla/departments/history/programs/oral/oralprimer/OHprimer.html>

Nantucket Historical Association

<http://www.nha.org/library/oralhistory/guidelines.html>

### **Print Resources**

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