

A Guide to Oral History Techniques for the Wildland Fire Community



Introduction

What is an Oral History?

Simply, an oral history is a collection of memories that an individual agrees to share with others. An oral history provides a look into the past from the subjective view of an individual. The memories are unique to the individual yet have value to those who choose to seek the wisdom and experience of others to better their own life, career, or their performance at the task that lies before them. The individual listener is responsible to find value from the story. The narrator (interviewee) is only responsible to focus on what he or she feels is important to tell others about.

Why are oral histories important to the wildland fire community?

Oral history narratives are beneficial for a variety of reasons. Adults learn and improve through a variety of different methods. Reliving history through the experiences of others is a valuable part of this learning experience. Telling stories while working up the fireline, in camp and the bunkhouse, or to relieve the drudgery of project work or mop-up are traditional ways of passing on knowledge and experiences along with entertaining both young and seasoned firefighters.

An oral history has the advantage of recording experiences and data not available in written records or in terms of policies and procedural conventions. It portrays a personal and unique track of experiences that have shaped and molded an individual. A properly conducted oral history provides the narrator the opportunity to share what is important to him or her, their ethos, values and principles along with their decisions, actions, and trail of experiences.

Within our wildland fire community these recollections of the past help us understand what has changed and what has stayed the same. These oral histories help to define who we are as a community and provide an anchor for our own memories.

What an Oral History is not!

An oral history requires forethought and planning, however it is not an intellectual exercise. The intent is to share a story, not to produce an investigative report. The purpose is the story in relation to the goals set for the interview. By-products produced by the narrative can provide elements for further research or discussion but that is left open to the listener to pursue or discover.

An oral history is not a series of questions and answers, nor is it necessarily focused on a specific event or specifically designed to enlighten and inform a listener.

Who can participate?

Anyone can participate. The objective of the Lessons Learned Center's Oral History Project is to develop a library of narratives that benefit all wildland firefighters. Age or experience level is not a critical factor. Much can be learned from those who are new to the wildland community but have experiences elsewhere that have aided in their success as a firefighter and/or skilled leader. The subjects covered in the interview are dependent on the breadth and/or complexity of the topic(s). An individual's experiences have value. It is incumbent on the narrator to determine how best to develop these experiences into a quality interview that provides value to others.

At a minimum an oral history requires 2 participants; the interviewer to prepare for the interview, to set up recording equipment and provide the questions to stimulate conversation; and the subject of the interview.

If you plan to interview subjects that shared common experiences, focusing on a specific shared time frame or a specific experience can add richness to the content.

Preparation for the Interview

An interview can be either general in scope or focus on specific themes that have value to you and to others. It is important to determine the goals and objectives to be accomplished in order to determine who to interview, and what background preparation is necessary to maximize the effectiveness of the interview.

Set a goal and identify objectives for the project. Establish these based on the premise that the overarching purpose of an oral history is to teach others. Your goals and objectives should have learning value for others within the wildland community.

Secondly, research your topic(s) in order to develop a thread of inquiry that weaves through the interview process, and to establish a rapport with your interviewee. This thread should tie to your overarching goal, and provide an anchor for your discussion points with your interview subject.

Make a list of potential interviewees. Searching for potential candidates may include briefing trusted sources on your project and soliciting recommendations from these sources; or because of your direct experience with potential interviewees, contacting people you already believe can help accomplish your goal. It may be necessary to expand your search for potential interview subjects beyond those known to you in order to adequately meet your objectives.

Arrange for and gather the recording equipment and expertise necessary to meet your needs. It is important to identify early on the type of equipment you will utilize to capture the oral history. There are many different sources of information on the technologies available for recording interviews such as:

The Oral History Association <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/> headquartered at Dickenson College in Carlisle, PA is a good source for information on recording technologies.

Recordings can include video and/or digital voice technologies. Video recording with a backup digital voice recorder is ideal. However, the availability of video equipment should not make or break your project. It is important, if video technology is used, to be intimately familiar with its limitations and capabilities. At a minimum the equipment should allow easy direct transfer to a computer or a data storage device (flash drive or SIM card). Assure that the data storage device and computer you are transferring it to have sufficient storage space.

The use of a videographer or a third person to set up the equipment and lighting, and operate and monitor the video and voice recording equipment during the interview is advantageous. This person allows you the opportunity to focus on the interview instead of the equipment and can assist in the editing process.

Remember that video recordings also require editing software and expertise in using those technologies. More time, effort and expense will likely be needed. Video recordings should be backed up with a stand-alone voice recording device. Devices that transmit through a remote microphone are ideal.

Digital voice recordings are much simpler than video. Voice recording equipment should be solid state/digital and capable of producing CD quality or better reproductions. Recorders with outlets that allow a direct connection to a computer are preferable.

Prior to the interview, test your equipment and have a record keeping system in place to catalog and track the recordings. Have plenty of additional drives, batteries, and cards or recording tape on hand.

Recruit your selected interviewee candidates. How you recruit your selected candidates will depend on your familiarity with them and their acceptance of the oral history concept. The effectiveness of your interview(s) will be based in large part on the relationship you establish with each interviewee.

Even if you already have a personal relationship with a potential candidate, your recruitment should include a written narrative that paints a picture of your project and your intent. Make sure that interviewees understand that the interview is not a private conversation. This narrative (see example in *Appendix A*) needs to explain your purpose and goal for the project, the equipment that will be used, the interview process, how the individual will help accomplish your objectives, and (importantly) how the editing and products of the interview will be used. This provides a foundation for dialog between you and the candidate and an opportunity for the candidate to better understand their role.

It is important that your interview subjects feel comfortable. A critical component of your success in developing an effective oral history will be the trust you engender with your interview subjects. Have the selected subjects prepare a biography to be read during the interview introduction. Trust in your intent will be magnified by interacting with your interviewee prior to the interview with written and verbal information. Encourage him or her to provide supporting material (e.g. maps or photos) for the interview.

Have your questions or phrases prepared prior to the interview. Develop open ended questions or phrases that provide an opportunity for the interviewee to reflect and respond fluidly. Specific questions may hinder candid responses.

Practice your questions out loud. Put yourself in the seat of the interviewee. Is the question you have designed simple enough to elicit recall and an opportunity for the interviewee to speak of an event, or time and place? Develop a list of follow-up specific questions for those events or topics that you want answered in detail.

Unless you have an agreement with the interviewee that the interview is distinctly structured to address a specific event, it is not necessary or even recommended, that you stick strictly to the prepared list of questions. Dialog between you and the interviewee may lead down a path more interesting than your planned direction. Be prepared to ad-lib. Details are often found in the nuances of a response to a question.

An interviewee may ask for your list of prepared questions prior to the interview. In such cases provide the interviewee with a list of topics you want to cover. Your objective is to meet your goal through their story. Providing specific questions may result in an interviewee overly preparing for the interview and impeding the flow of your interview.

The Interview

Make a list of your tasks to be accomplished pre, during and post interview.

Test your recording equipment on-site with you and the interviewee speaking. Assure that both the primary and backup recording devices are functioning within a range of acceptable quality.

Choose a location that is comfortable for the interviewee. The location should be quiet and free of distractions. Outdoor sites pose problems with camera lighting and background noise that is picked up by recording equipment. Indoors is preferable. For video interviews select a position for the interviewee in front of a neutral background. The focus is on the interviewee and their story. Modern recording equipment is very sensitive to background noise and lighting. Noise from fans, ac units, the wind, radios and intercoms, and high contrast lighting are a distraction for the interview participants and those listening and viewing your product.

Assure that the interviewee is comfortable and ready to proceed. Put the interviewee at ease. The interviewee may be nervous or intimidated by the situation. Reassure him or her that the interview is not cast in stone, and that the questions you have will be used to guide the dialog. At any time the interviewee is welcome to pause to reflect, to develop a train of thought, to take a break, or to correct or clarify a previous portion of the interview. Assure him or her that the interview will be edited to highlight the salient points that meet the goal and objectives, and to capture the intent of the interviewee's responses.

Start the interview with an introduction that includes the date, time, and place. Introduce your interviewee and the topic. Allow the interviewee to introduce them through a recitation of their biography. This has the benefit of allowing the interviewee

his voice, and provides an opportunity for the interviewee to speak about something that the interviewee is comfortable talking about.

Ask one question at a time. Begin with simple open-ended questions to develop rapport and set the tone for the interview instead of those that could be answered with a simple yes or no. Follow up with related questions immediately before moving on to maintain the flow of the dialog. Seek clarification or more detail by rephrasing a question if the interviewee is not providing the information you are seeking. Use your list of topics or questions as a guide, but be prepared to deviate from your prepared route. Information offered by the interviewee may be worth pursuing. Take advantage of the opportunity. Then return to your prepared course. Leave more sensitive or probing questions for later in the interview.

Display active listening skills during the interview. The interviewee will be keying off your body language. Take notes on key phrases or events referred to by the interviewee and that you want to explore in detail. Listen intently and verbally respond to statements that you find intriguing or particularly pertinent. Stimulate conversation by exploring what the interviewee felt and how he or she maneuvered through a particular situation. Work at finding the touch points that produce the story you are looking for.

Monitor the well-being of the interviewee. Pay particular attention to his or her energy level. Maybe it would be wise to provide them with a fresh glass of water just in case they get thirsty during the interview. Give the interviewee time to think. Silence can be used to collect your thoughts as well.

Close the interview with a summary question and/or an opportunity for the interviewee to provide a summary statement. Do not shut down the interview abruptly. Continue recording as you review your notes to assure that your objectives have been met. If a salient point has not been adequately addressed ask the interviewee if he or she would provide additional information or clarification before shutting down the recording devices.

Post Interview

Provide the interviewee with a rundown of the process that will be used to edit and produce the final product. Unless you have agreed otherwise beforehand, it is best at this point to politely close-out with the interviewee. Remember, the product you want to produce has specific requirements designed by you. You need time to collect your thoughts.

Immediately upon completion of the interview label all tapes and catalog your notes for future reference.

Review your notes and identify specific items that will benefit the editing process.

Take time to consider the following: (1) What did we set out to do? (2) What actually happened? (3) Why was there a difference? Then review your findings and prepare to act on: (4) What am I going to do the next time?

If you have used a videographer or assistant(s) who were present in the room during the interview, include them in your after action review of the interview process.

References

Internet

Baylor University Institute for Oral History. <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/>

Indiana University, Center for the Study of History and Memory. <http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/>

Smithsonian Institution, "*Smithsonian Folklore and Oral History Interviewing Guide.*" <http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf>

Print Materials

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide.* Twayne Publishers, 2003

APPENDIX A

Lessons Learned Center Wildland Fire Leader Oral History Project

Purpose

To produce a series of video and voice recorded narrations of wildland fire managers to help listeners and viewers better understand how individuals developed their full range of skills and abilities in developing working relationships, managing wildlands, and leading in wildland fire.

Intent

To demonstrate and inform others how you as a leader and manager have learned to adapt, taken advantage of opportunities, and learned to successfully maneuver within the wildland fire community.

The Scene

Individual interviews will take place in an office setting utilizing office style chairs and furnishings. In the room will be two videographers, an interviewer (myself), two video cameras and digital voice recorder. I will have a pad and pen to jot notes that I may refer to during the interview and to identify key points for later reference in editing the recorded conversation.

Dress is casual or what makes you feel comfortable and relaxed. The video products will picture you from the waist up.

The interview session will last approximately 1 hour. This is flexible. Time must be allowed for preparation for the next interview session and to collect thoughts and notes.

Interview Preparation

You have first-hand experience within the wildland management and fire experience that is valuable to others in charting the course and development of their careers. This session provides you with an opportunity to share your stories, wisdom and experiences with others. In so doing, through your lessons learned, others will benefit.

Prepare for the interview by thinking of significant events through your career that have shaped your proved successful within the wildland fire community.

- What "portal experiences" or watershed moments provided you with the mindfulness and clear thinking to discard past beliefs in favor of a new approach to viewing your role within the wildland community?
- What has changed from your initial impression of working for the agency and now?

- What has not changed about you in that time?
- Who are (were) the leaders (not agency specific) that matter to you, and why?
- When did you first recognize the value that fire management played in your personal development as a person?
- How do you display your leadership qualities?
- How do you assess difficult situations and successfully maneuver through trying times?
- How do you assess risks?
- How do you weigh risk against the actions necessary to protect threatened values?
How has this changed for you during your career?

Prepare a simple biography that details the highlights of your career for me to read as part of this introduction. This will have the added benefit of helping you collect your thoughts as I read it aloud.

The interview process will focus on your career and your perspective. There is no hidden agenda. I will open the interview by identifying the location and purpose of the interview and an introduction of you. This is your time to tell your story. AS we progress through the interview you can pause to reflect, choose to take a break, and choose to return to earlier comments to clarify or correct your thoughts.

The recorded interview will be edited. Particular attention will be paid to those events, experiences and observations that will help those in their careers at the single resource leader to middle manager level. However, my hope is that your narration will benefit anyone who views what you have to offer.

I look forward to the opportunity to working with you in telling your story.