Guide to Oral History

A resource for oral historians in South Australia and the Northern Territory
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Introduction

This guide has been prepared by Oral History Australia SA/NT as an introductory resource for those undertaking, or planning to undertake, an oral history in South Australia or the Northern Territory.

We highly recommend that you read the material here, and also participate in a hands-on training workshop and refer to the detailed information in the Oral History Handbook, by Beth Robertson (see page 18).

Oral History Australia South Australia/Northern Territory

Oral History Australia SA/NT (OHA SA/NT) is affiliated with Oral History Australia (OHA). OHA is a non-profit body whose members practise and promote oral history. The aims of Oral History Australia are to:

- promote discussion and training on all aspects of the methodology and ethical practices of oral history as a discipline and a means of gathering and preserving social and cultural history
- foster preservation, access and use of oral history collections
- support State and Territory Oral History associations
- provide a national voice on all aspects of oral history
- link Australian oral historians to the international oral history movement.

The Oral History Association of Australia was formed in 1978 and in 2013 was re-named Oral History Australia. There are now associations in each state. It remains a non-profit body whose members practise and promote oral history.

Oral History Australia SA/NT came to life just seven months after the national body was founded in Perth in July 1978.

Workshops

OHA SA/NT runs workshops twice a year on ‘How to do oral history’ at the State Library of South Australia. Advanced workshops which focus on particular subjects such as memory, running a community project, and using oral history for exhibitions, multi-media productions, websites and publications are held once to twice a year. Regional workshops are held when community groups request a training session.

Annual grant

An annual grant is offered to assist oral history projects in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Grants have supported groups such as CraftSouth, Adelaide Zoo, Adelaide Botanic Gardens, and individuals in places like Port Pirie and Peterborough to carry out interviews and prepare transcripts.
Activities

Get-togethers include visits to organisations such as the Migration Museum and the archives of the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia, and talks by people such as the audio technicians at the State Library to bring members up to date with recording equipment. Other sessions include individuals who talk about their projects such as Kay Lawrence who spoke about the embroiderers who did the embroidery for the Parliament House in Canberra.

Audio technicians Silver Moon and Peter Kolomitsev demonstrating digital recording equipment at an OHA SA/NT workshop. Photographer: June Edwards.

OHA SA/NT website

The OHA SA/NT website: oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au includes a SA175th project which entailed putting up twenty interviews undertaken by members with associated transcripts, logs and photographs. It is a useful example of oral history and has been used in many educational ways for those starting off a project: school students, family historians and by prospective employers to get an understanding of the process.
OHA National conference
In 2013 OHA SA/NT ran a joint biennial national conference with History SA called ‘She said, he said: Reading, Writing and Recording History’.

June Edwards, Sally Stephenson, Karen George and Tonia Bradstreet at the 2013 conference ‘She said, he said: Reading, Writing and Recording History’. Photograph: June Edwards.

What is Oral History?

Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past it also helps them towards a future of their own making.

Paul Thompson, ‘The voice of the past’, 1978

In many ways, oral history has transformed the practice of contemporary history. Whereas interviews of significant political and social citizens have been evident in documented history, and remain vital to the critical examination of written history, rarely has the voice of the ‘ordinary’ person been recorded as part of that style of documented historical evidence.

If I were to ask the audience now, ‘Who built the pyramids?’ the first reaction, reflex, is ‘pharaohs’. The pharaohs didn’t lift a finger. … No, slaves, the anonymous ones through the centuries built the pyramids. … I’m interested in … those millions and multi-millions of people down through the centuries who made the wheels go round but never made our traditional history books. We hear of generals, we hear of kings, we have industrialists, great statesmen. But who are these others?

Studs Terkel, 2007

Definitions of oral history
Paul Thompson, Research Professor at the University of Essex, and luminary in the international oral history movement, describes oral history as a history built around people. Thompson argues that while oral history has come under question by some historians who focus on fact-finding research, the value of oral history lies with its social purpose. He
claims oral history can open new forms of inquiry and can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place. Thompson’s understanding of oral history underpins the humanity of its practice.

Beth M Robertson, respected oral historian and foundation Oral History Officer at the State Library of South Australia, translates this philosophical ideal into practice and defines oral history in the following terms:

Oral history is a picture of the past in people’s own words. Oral history is as old as humanity but today it is associated with recorded interviews with people about their memories.

A practical definition of oral history is:

- A recorded interview in question-and-answer format
- Conducted by an interviewer who has some knowledge of the subject to be discussed
- With a knowledgeable interviewee speaking from first-hand experience
- On subjects of historical interest
- That is made accessible to other researchers.

Robertson’s definition is widely accepted by Oral History Australia as a practical description of the practice of oral history.

**Oral history as a resource for researchers**

Oral history is about asking someone to talk about their life, to recall and describe their experiences and to reflect on those experiences. It is also about recording that person’s recollections in such a way that other people can listen to, watch or read about those personal recollections. It is a resource for research. It is not a conversation but a formal two-way exchange which is recorded. It is also about capturing the beauty of the voice.

Oral histories are now recognised as a way of learning about people who are not necessarily documented in the written record. It is different from other types of history in that it allows people from all walks of life to present history from their own perspective. Without oral history, there is a danger of denying a wide range of people and their experiences their place in Australia’s history.

Oral history is a growing industry. It provides the basis for a wide range of creative activities. Apart from the obvious use as a source for history, it is used for the production of theatre, art, poetry, radio programs, television dramas, dance, community publications, exhibitions, websites, classroom resources, and urban redevelopment and urban design projects.

Oral history can help bridge the generation gap as demonstrated by the project undertaken by Mt Barker school children who interviewed people who went to World War Tw. It can teach an appreciation of different cultures, such as the exhibitions in the community gallery at the Migration Museum. It can promote renewed self-confidence and esteem. For example, in Murray Bridge, a project with people suffering from Alzheimer’s disease produced positive experiences for the participants. With these sorts of projects the history part of the recordings becomes a by-product rather than the main focus.
Memory and oral history

It is the very fact that oral historians work with people that has attracted criticism. There is a concern not only that people’s memories are unreliable but that they can make up stories and offer a skewed version of their experiences. However, the supposedly more reliable documentary and traditional historical sources have the same problem. Contemporary newspaper articles, government reports, personal letters and other sources which comprise the historical record are also at risk of displaying an exaggerated, biased or distorted view of the past. The main message is to treat all sources with caution and the greater the variety of views and experiences gathered about the past, the broader is the understanding. Oral historians should do sufficient background research and cross-checking in order to minimise the likelihood of recording unreliable stories.

Basic to any efforts to record the past is an understanding of how memory works. Experimental psychologist Frederick Bartlett showed that the process of recalling an event or episode from the past is not a case of pushing a button for a full image or narrative to burst forth. Rather, we reconstruct the event or episode. We may locate it in time by eliminating periods when it could not take place. We may construct the participants in the event by remembering one and then another incident, and by recalling who was not there and so it goes. Sometimes this occurs subconsciously but sometimes we talk about it.

The ‘mix’ of memories

Paul Thompson points out that to learn or remember something, we must first understand it. Once understood we tend to store it in categories, which makes it possible for us to reconstruct the event at a later time. He also shows that to remember something we have to be interested. Thompson also addresses the reliability of memory. Studies have revealed that the process of selecting what we remember and discarding the rest occurs soon after an event. Once the initial selection has taken place, it is likely to stay the same for long periods.

Finally Thompson discusses how far memory is affected by increasing age. He identifies various stages. Until roughly the age of four, we have little long-term memory. Then from four to roughly the onset of puberty we have a photographic memory. After that and especially from 30 onwards, our ability to recall immediate events declines. As we age, there is a life-review stage where we reflect on and recall episodes in our lives. The way we remember and the factors shaping the nature of memory influence the recall of events from the past.

Historian Manning Clarke said when writing his autobiography:

One has early memories, not motion pictures, but still lifes. I thought this was rather like a painter with his palette. You mix them up. I’ll have a bit of this, a bit of that. I’ll put that in.

Oral history is about capturing that mix of memories.
The paradox of memory

‘Mnemonic’, written by Simon McBurney, is a stage play about the complexity of memory. Adam Cook, the director of the play, recognises the dilemmas of working with memories:

A memory is only as real as the last time you remembered it. … memory is a ceaseless process, not a repository for inert information.

This argument causes a dilemma for oral historians as it can cause the practice to be too easily dismissed. Inga Clendinnen recognises the need for human beings to have their own stories, while simultaneously recognising the paradox this creates. She states:

Humans have a natural talent for stories. … They make stories in part because they need experience, their own and others, to be processed into a consultable form. … But there is a problem … our stories depend on memory, and memory is unreliable. … - our memories are essential; our memories are unreliable. Most of us live with that discomforting paradox.

Memories – living histories

To further this dilemma, oral history research is not the sole domain of academic researchers or professional historians. Rather oral historians draw on the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology and linguistics to understand better the narratives of memory.

Perks and Thomson, however, describe memories as living histories, arguing that what makes oral historians unique is that they speak to the person directly related to the experience, engaging in an active human relationship that transforms history in the following ways:

- The interviewee not only recalls the past but also asserts his or her interpretation of that past … the interviewee can be historian as well as the source.
- Oral history has just not been about making histories … a primary aim [can be about] empowerment of individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product.

Ethical Practice

Paul Thompson recognises the valuable social benefits of the practice and process of oral history stating:

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged… towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact - and thence understanding - between social classes, and between generations … In short it makes for fuller human beings.
Understanding the process, however, must always be from an ethical standpoint of the interviewer reflective of Thompson’s understanding of the humanity of oral history practice. Such practice puts the wellbeing of the interviewee before the interests of any research.

Managing an oral history project

Running an oral history project requires project planning. The most important aspect of any project is to be clear about what the project will encompass and what will be excluded. The end product for which the interviews are used (e.g. a publication, a website, research, performances, exhibitions) must be decided at the beginning, as this determines the approach.

A clear understanding of the context and a statement of purpose sets everyone straight. The project manager then has a document which explains why the project is happening and what it is about. A clear rationale is useful for many purposes. It is valuable for interviewers, interviewees, any funding agencies, management within organisations, and for the library or archives where the recordings are to be deposited.

Researchers in the near and distant future need to understand the purpose and context of the project which enables them to determine whether the recordings could be useful. A clear mission statement also helps a project manager deflect a project being taken on irrelevant tangents by overenthusiastic individuals.

The role of the project manager in an oral history project

The next important requirement is to have a hardworking, intelligent, committed and practical project manager, with a good advisory group. It can be someone who runs the whole project themselves or it can be someone who co-ordinates volunteers or paid oral historians to record the interviews.

A good manager sets out clearly the purpose of the project and ensures the goals are realistic. They understand what the end product will be which can determine what is done, for example if it will be a publication then transcripts are essential. The funding needs are identified to ensure the project goals can be accomplished. They have good personal skills so they understand their interviewers, and identify interviewees who are the best storytellers and who have the most relevant knowledge. A timeline is established and worked to rather than forgotten. They ensure their interviewers understand the goals of the project, are aware of the various stages, are trained, use the best equipment and are well grounded in the background of the subject. They keep the interviewees informed about the project and the process, and are available to answer any questions. It is also important to let interviewees know how the recordings and transcripts are going and ensure they understand their ethical and legal rights as they are the copyright owners so they have rights over access to the material. A project manager is a good record-keeper.

A manager needs to be a good communicator, especially if they are working with volunteers. They need to assess the volunteers who offer their services. It is essential to work out people’s strengths and what they are comfortable doing, because if they are not good with administration, problems can be created with the interviewees and with making the material available for research. If an interviewer only does the interviews and neglects
any follow up, then the manager needs to ensure copyright forms are signed and the recordings and transcripts get back to the interviewee. For various reasons, people give up during a project so a manager needs to be prepared for change and identify how to fill gaps. They also need to be able to deal with strong-minded souls who want to go their own way, or say they will do certain things but never get round to it. Occasionally it means the manager ends up doing the work themselves.

Most projects which involve a group of people end up being a positive process for all those involved as it is not just about the interviews as a research resource. Good personal relationships develop, and positive events such as project launches give people great happiness. Everyone benefits from the knowledge which is gained.

Oral history interviews and respect
This leads to the next point which is that oral history relies very much on respect and good manners. An interview is a demanding process and an interviewer is in an honoured position when someone agrees to share their experiences and knowledge. If you are going to put someone through this process then the best possible job should be done. A person should always be allowed to reveal their story in their own way and their own time.

An interviewer needs to do background research and meet with the interviewee in a preliminary interview to determine what is to be covered when the interview is recorded. It is always important to follow up with the interviewee to confirm dates, explain the project, thank them for their participation, to ensure they get copies of the recording and transcript and to confirm they are happy for it to be deposited in the library for researchers to use. Because the copyright is with the interviewee, s/he has the right to say no to it being made available, or they can impose access restrictions or a time lapse before it is released.

The main point here is that an interview is all about the interviewee and managing the interviewee in a respectful fashion. It is essential to keep them informed throughout the process and ensure they are satisfied with the end product before it is available for researchers to use.

What to consider in an oral history project
To run a successful oral history project, groups or an individual need to consider that:

- it will take longer than you think
- it will take a lot of energy
- there needs to be a clear understanding of what is to be achieved
- the project manager and advisory group need to have good project management skills
- everyone involved will learn new skills and competencies
- good interpersonal skills are essential
- commitment from participants ensures success but there is the need to accommodate change
- record-keeping is important
- the interview process is an involved and formal process, not a chat
the best digital equipment must be used to ensure a broadcast quality recording
it requires respect
and once it is finished you take real joy in the achievement.

See Appendix A for a copy of the *Word of Mouth* article by Helen Haltis on her oral history project interviewing members of the South Australian Greek community.

**Recordkeeping**

For a project with a number of interviewees it is useful to keep a spreadsheet of the steps in the process as it is easy to lose track of when, or whether, things have been done. The spreadsheet includes information such as:

- Name of interviewee
- Name of interviewer linked to the interviewee, if more than one person is interviewing
- Date when invitation letter was sent
- Date of preliminary interview
- Date when letter was sent to confirm interview
- Date/s of interview/s
- Date when recordings are deposited in the library
- Date when copyright form signed
- Date interview recording sent for transcription and return date
- Date when mp3 files and transcripts sent to interviewee
- Date when interviewee approved the transcript or sent back changes to be made
- Date when transcript is finalised for publication.

It is also useful to record any sources from which background information was gathered such as archives, published material or any previously recorded interviews in the same research area.

**Documenting processes**

Records ensure the partnership with principal stakeholders is maintained and decisions and processes are documented in all forms. For example:

- reports
- letters
- emails
- phone conversations
- meetings, including face-to-face, electronic and by telecommunication.

Keeping good records is a way of ensuring that people stay connected and happy with the progress of the project.
What makes a good oral history interview?

A good interview is more than just a recorded conversation over a nice cup of tea. Oral history is distinguished from other forms of interviews by its content and extent. Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience and reflections, with sufficient time allowed for the interviewees to give their story the fullness they desire. The content of oral history interviews is grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events.

Example interviews can be heard on the Association’s website: http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/category/interviews/

The oral history interview

- It is a structured interview where the interviewer and interviewee have a good understanding of the topic being discussed and the purpose of the interview.
- The interviewer and interviewee are relaxed and the interview is recorded in a quiet place.
- Both are aware that the interview will be kept for posterity and used by other researchers.
- A good interview process ensures everyone knows what will happen and when, and expectations and legal requirements are met.
- Good interviews are technically well done.
- A good interview is one where people are comfortable with the occasion because there is mutual respect which produces a relaxed atmosphere and productive outcome and the interviewee is allowed to tell their story in their own way.
Both parties need to do their homework. Interviewers need to know the subject – read and research – so they ask appropriate questions. Interviewees need to revisit their personal archives and memories so their thoughts are clear.

A non-recorded preliminary meeting ensures people spend time together to get to know one another and to discuss the themes and topics which will be covered in the interview. The interviewer then prepares a list of questions to help them stay focussed - but this is a tool, not a script!

A good interview means both participants understand what they are talking about and what they want from the interview.

The process is also flexible enough in the questioning so that unexpected gems can come to light.

Creating a successful interview largely depends on the skills of the interviewer and the understanding of the interviewee.

Resident at Minda, Maria Edwards (right) being interviewed by Jackie Saunders, a participant in the Tutti Arts program, based at Minda. Catherine Murphy, centre, worked as writer/researcher on the Tutti Arts/Minda project, ‘Their Shadows In Us’. Project outcomes in 2013 were a visual arts exhibition at Flinders University Gallery and a major catalogue essay.

Responsibilities of the interviewer

An interviewer has several responsibilities. They need to:

- protect the rights of the interviewee by undertaking the interview in an ethical fashion.
- explain to interviewees the interview process and their rights in relation to copyright, reviewing the finished product, and where the recording will be housed and how it will be used.
• undertake training in the skills of interviewing and using the recording equipment in keeping with the goal of long term preservation and access. \(^1\)
• become knowledgeable about, and able to use, the best recording equipment available so the final product is technically as perfect as possible.
• have good personal skills such as patience, flexibility, sensitivity, curiosity, to ensure they are effective listeners.
• respect the interviewee and ensure interviewees are:
  o engaged with the interviewer
  o given time to think about what they want to say
  o what they do say and their way of telling their story is accepted as valid.
• bring empathy and rapport to the interviewee. Occasionally interviewers can be impatient, emphasise their own knowledge and are determined to ask the next question on the list instead of allowing a flexible approach. This approach can stultify an interview.
• when interviews cover sensitive or traumatic events or issues be aware of the effect this may have on both the interviewee and interviewer, and have suitable support mechanisms in place.
• conduct an interview with objectivity, honesty and integrity without imposing their views and opinions as it is the interviewee’s story which is being recorded.
• an interviewer’s role is to be a facilitator not the principal subject of the interview; if the interviewer talks too much, then they are likely to be talking too much!
• respect the interviewee’s equal authority in the interviews and honour their right to respond to questions in their own style and language.
• strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline, while avoiding stereotypes, misrepresentations, or manipulations of the interviewee’s words.
• remember that an interview is all about the voice and often the accent and tone of the language is almost as important as what is being said.

A good interview ensures the interviewer does not shine, only the interviewees are meant to shine.

The role of the interviewee

An interviewee’s responsibility is to consider what they want to contribute to the process before the interview so they are more relaxed and knowledgeable when it happens. The aim is for objectivity. An interviewee needs to be as clear and honest as they can be in answer to the questions and state when they cannot remember.

The interviewee:
• reveals a good knowledge of the subject area
• understands their own place within the overall narrative
• is clear about what they wish, and do not wish, to talk about
• is a good narrator who strives for honesty and reflects on relevant past events
• has the ability to tell a relevant story in an engaging way
• does not go off on irrelevant tangents.

\(^1\)Training is available through Oral History Australia SA/NT. See page 3 and http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/featured/oral-history-workshops/
Rights, copyright and access
A good interview ensures all parties understand their rights, the recordings are preserved and the collecting institution is clear about access to the recordings and transcripts. The interviewee understands the broader historical context and is happy to make the interview available for research within the bounds of their rights to copyright.

Participants need to be clear about:
- whether the recording will be placed in a repository
- what interviewees will receive after the interview, such as a copy of the recording, and transcript
- whether a publication, website or other product will be created
- the implications of assigning copyright to another party, and the rights of interviewees to have a say in the use of their material by asking for anonymity and/or placing restrictions on use of the interview during their lifetime
- asking each interviewee to sign an agreement which clearly states whether the interviewee will retain copyright or assign it to another party and under what conditions assignment of copyright is granted
- ensuring that interviews are preserved for future researchers by placing them in a repository under conditions agreeable to the interviewee.

A good interview depends on many things, not just a professional interviewer and a knowledgeable interviewee, but a process which is well organised and thought through and all commitments met.

Uses of oral history recordings
Ultimately a good oral history interview enables the use of the collected stories for such projects as:
- the life histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other groups who may be poorly represented in written sources
- the history of a local community
- documentation of family history
- a means of encouraging children to treat people as ‘living history books’, at the same time increasing understanding between generations
- provision of historic information for urban redevelopment projects
- research purposes in tertiary education studies
- corporate and institutional histories
- museums to enliven displays with excerpts from transcripts or the audio recordings
- websites
- publications that capture readers’ imaginations
- radio, television and plays to promote authentic voices of the past.

For an interviewee, an oral history interview should be life-affirming and for the interviewer, it should be part of life-long learning.
Archivist Marilyn Ward and oral historian Rob Linn at the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia Archives. Rob Linn is holding his history of the Society, Good Earth. Photographer: June Edwards.

Oral History in South Australia – the State Library

The JD Somerville Oral History Collection, housed in the State Library of South Australia (SLSA), was established in 1987 as the central repository for unpublished oral history recordings and transcripts in South Australia. The collection is intended to provide an oral record of all aspects of the South Australian experience and particularly of those who are poorly represented in documentary records such as low income earners, people of non-English speaking background, women, and country people.

The foundation collection was a Jubilee 150 project, “S.A. Speaks,” consisting of interviews with 45 men and women who were broadly representative of South Australia in the first decades of the twentieth century. Since 1987 the community has responded with enthusiasm to the Somerville Collection and the Library receives over 300 hours of recordings each year from practitioners including genealogists, local history groups, post-graduate students and professional historians. The collection includes individual interviews, community projects, radio programs, speeches, and performances, which document South Australian life.

The SLSA undertakes oral history projects occasionally and funding has been available for projects such as the National Library of Australia’s Eminent Australians, Veterans’ Affairs Vietnam veterans, and the Premier’s Department Aboriginal servicemen and women. Public libraries support many projects and various community groups and individuals find grant funding to enable projects to be completed.

Contacts at the State Library of South Australia

The SLSA Archival Field Officer provides advice on designing and managing an oral history project and ongoing support once the project is underway.

Tonia Bradstreet, Archival Collection Development
State Library of South Australia, North Terrace Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 419, Adelaide SA 5001
P: +61 8 8207 7260 | F: +61 8 8207 7247 | E: tonia.bradstreet@sa.gov.au

The State Library’s audio technicians provide support and one-on-one training with the digital equipment. High quality digital field equipment is available for loan from the State Library for free as long as interviewers agree to deposit the original recordings in the Library. The library provides copies of the recordings in exchange.

Peter Kolomitsev, Audio Preservation
State Library of South Australia, North Terrace Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 419, Adelaide SA 5001
P: +61 8 8207 7318 | F: +61 8 8207 7274 | E: peter.kolomitsev@sa.gov.au

For projects that are not lodged with the State Library, a recorder is available for hire from the OHA SA/NT: http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/featured/equipement-hire/.
Oral History Handbook
Copies of the Oral History Handbook by Beth Robertson can be purchased from the OHA SA/NT or the State Library of South Australia copy centre. Copies are also available at local public libraries. This is an excellent publication for anyone working in the field of oral history. For details see: http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/publications/

Oral history workshops
The State Library and the OHA SA/NT run one-day introductory oral history workshops on ‘How to do oral history’ at the State Library on North Terrace, Adelaide. Workshops can be run for community groups at other locations if there is a sufficient number of participants. Regional workshops have been held in towns from Oodnadatta to Goolwa. Please contact the OHA SA/NT to discuss possible workshops. Workshops are advertised on the website: http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/featured/oral-history-workshops/


Resources
The following appendices include:

Appendix A: Helen Haltis article describing the Greek Migration Experience oral history project. Originally published in the OHA SA/NT publication, Word of Mouth Spring 2014, no.67, p.21-23.

Appendix B: Examples of master letters to interviewees which can be adapted and changed to suit any project.

Appendix C: State Library of South Australia’s copyright consent form, and the Library’s forms which accompany recordings for cataloguing when they are deposited in the library.
Appendix A: Helen Haltis article in Word of Mouth Spring 2014 no. 67 Oral History Workshop pp. 21-23 describing the Greek Migration Experience oral history project

Oral History Workshop
On September 4, OHA SA/NT ran a well-attended and very successful workshop at the State Library of South Australia entitled ‘Planning a community oral history project’. Our wonderful presenters were Pauline Cockrill (History SA), Helen Haltis (OEEGA), Madeleine Regan (Veneti Market Gardeners) and June Edwards (OHA SA/NT).

What follows is an edited version (due to space limitations) of Helen Haltis’ presentation on behalf of the Organisation of Hellene and Hellene Cypriot Women of Australia Inc.

Why we decided to record the Greek Migration Experience
For many years we had thought about recording the Greek Migrant’s story but did not actually know where to start and how to go about it and what format to do it in. We wanted to document our history, understand our origins, the sacrifices that were made by the Greek migrants, the contribution of the Greek people to the building of Australia and what these people experienced under adversity. But we wanted to give the migrants themselves the opportunity to tell their story in their own words. We wanted these stories on record for the families of the migrants, their children, grandchildren and future generations, but also for the wider Australian community.

The process
In 2011, the Federal Government released the Community Heritage Grants which offered us the financial support to undergo this project. Catherine Manning from the Migration Museum with June Edwards from the Oral History Association helped us apply for the grant. We were successful and so the hard work began to make this project a reality. All of our committee members volunteered to be involved but four would conduct the interviews.

We knew that many of the migrants did not have a good command of the English language and as they were aging they were reverting back to Greek. So we decided to record ten interviews in English and ten in Greek. I volunteered to interview in Greek. Very nervously initially, but then I was told that my Greek was that of a Greek village girl, and they understood me very well and they were comfortable.

We had funding for the Greek transcripts and summaries in English, and the committee members who could type would transcribe all the English interviews in their own time. We decided to send letters in both Greek and English to our members for expressions of interest but we only got three responses. Not a good start. We then decided to have a small display in Glendi, the Greek Festival, in 2012. Word of mouth and the direct approach proved fruitful. To fill remaining gaps, we listed exactly what we were missing and targeted people in the Greek community.

We were ready, so we thought.
Choosing the interviewees
Choosing the interviewees, we knew, would be challenging. We wanted to give as many people as possible the opportunity to tell their story, however we did not want the same story told over and over, so we had to be careful. We knew that Greeks came from different parts of Greece, but also from the Diaspora Greek communities where Greeks had lived for centuries, i.e. Turkey, Cyprus and Egypt. They also came to Australia for different reasons, by different means, some on assisted passages, some paid their own way, others as refugees. They came as labourers, brides and families, predominantly from rural parts of Greece. These people settled in different parts of South Australia: in the Riverland, Port Pirie, Coober Pedy, Thevenard, as well as Adelaide.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese proved extremely helpful, giving us names of Greek Community leaders in the various country towns. They gave us names and telephone numbers of people they thought had an interesting story. Now we were ready to start the interviews and we were down to fifteen months left before it had to be completed – plenty of time we thought.

The importance of extensive research
We thought we would not have to do too much research as all of our committee members are migrants, or children of migrants, so we thought we knew a lot about the migrant history. How wrong we were. We started off with basic knowledge but very quickly we found that we needed a lot more information if we were to formulate good questions and enable the interviewee to give us as much information as possible so that their interview contained a lot of Greek history as well as their experiences in Australia. We had huge gaps in our knowledge. The internet became a very good friend. We asked people who had a good Greek education and knowledge of Greek history for a rundown of Greek history during the 20th century.

We had heard about the population exchange after the Greek/Turkish war of 1922 but did not know details. We knew that there would not be anybody alive that was part of this exchange, but we wanted to find a descendant who could tell us all about it, and how this contributed to the family coming to Australia, and we were successful. We had heard about the stolen generation of Greek children after World War Two but did not really understand what that meant. We did not know that Greeks had fought in the Korean War. We did not know that Australia had a maximum of two children policy for a couple of years in the mid-1950s which then increased to four children per family, forcing families to leave children behind. These facts and many more we learnt as we went along and so we had to find people who had these as part of their story.

The challenges
We thoroughly enjoyed conducting these interviews and their stories had a profound effect on us. We were asking people to remember those early years, tell us their story and at times it was very hard, very emotional and although we tried to push on, there were times when we had to stop the recording for a breather. We must remember that most of these people were very young, around twenty years of age, leaving their villages, their homes, their families for the first time and we were asking them to remember those days. Children left behind grandparents, cousins, school friends. Many did not have a choice; they were encouraged, pushed and in some cases coerced by their families as the only saviour for the family.
At all times we had to keep all this in mind when asking them personal questions. We had to embrace their grief and make sure they knew we understood their pain. We interviewed women who came out as young brides, to marry older men whom they had never met. Some worked out, some did not, and we had to be careful there. We had to keep an eye on what was being said. We had to listen. We did not want family conflicts coming up, no value judgements. We had to make sure that the interviewee understood that what they said would be for public viewing.

Editing was one thing that we had not thought about until we came to checking the transcripts. That took many, many hours and was left to two of us to burn the midnight oil. In the end we had to pay an English teacher of Greek background to do the editing, making sure the transcripts were not altered but they had to make sense. Remember these people had limited English and in many cases were illiterate in Greek also. This was not budgeted for and so it had to come out of our funds. If we were interviewing an elderly person we made sure that the family knew what we were doing and agreed. In a couple of cases one of the children wanted to sit in at the interview. In another case the interviewee wanted to listen to the recording before agreeing to it being transcribed and put on public display.

The Launch
We decided to have the launch of the Greek Migration Experience at the Thebarton Community Centre because many of the Greek migrants lived in that council area when they arrived and many still do. We invited Mr Christos Maniakis-Grivas, the Greek Consul to South Australia and Mr Hieu Van Le the Chairman of SAMEAC (now Governor of SA) to take part in the launch, The Mayor of the City of West Torrens Hon John Trainer, politicians and leaders in the Greek community as well as the interviewees and their families and of course our members.

I spoke about the project and why and how we went about doing it and how informative and emotional it was for both us the interviewers and the interviewees. I had picked a few funny bits out of the interviews which I knew the interviewees would not mind being repeated and so lightened the evening, as I knew that it would be very emotional for many of them.

When we were doing the interviews we asked each interviewee for two to three photographs from their early years and any documents or paper which they had brought with them together with their passport. We scanned all these and made a PowerPoint presentation which ran on a loop throughout the evening. During the 1950s and 1960s many Greek singers in Greece recorded songs about migration and the lot of the Greek migrant in faraway countries like Australia. They were extremely popular at the time and even today they can be heard in many homes. We included many of them in the PowerPoint presentation and played them as the people came into the hall. I must say it was a very emotional time, watching them come into the hall and hearing these songs with tears in their eyes.

Also we copied two to three minute snippets of each interview, something that was unique to that particular interviewee, burned them on CDs and had them available in CD players with headphones for people to listen to at their leisure. This part did not go too well, as the room was far too noisy, people were eager to talk about their early days.
The State Library had made two CDs of each interview, we have kept one and the other was presented to each interviewee on stage by the Greek Consul. This was followed by a Greek supper. It was an extremely successful evening, one which many speak about today. A number of people came up to us and wanted to tell their story if we were to continue. I see we have to include many more stories in our collection.

The benefits
This project gave the Greek people the opportunity to tell their story. It made them proud, to share their experiences and what they contributed to Australia but also what they had endured. As one elderly gentleman said to me, fighting back tears, it is the first time anybody had asked him how he coped in those early years, with the loneliness. Nobody cared. And he thanked me from the bottom of his heart for giving him this opportunity. He said he felt a sense of relief, a heavy weight had lifted after more than 50 years.

We felt we owed it to these early migrants to give them the opportunity to tell their story in their own words, to explain the conditions which made them leave their beloved motherland for a better, safer and more fulfilling life for their families. They did not want their children to go through the hardships that they had endured. In Australia they are called ‘the Greeks’ in Greece they are ‘the Australians’. Where do they feel they belong? However, having said that, nobody had any regrets about coming here. Most came on an assisted passage for two years and then they could return to Greece. However, they are all still here – they had nothing to go back to. As most of them said, ‘Australia is my home but Greece will always be my mother country’.

The wider Australian community can learn a lot from listening/reading the stories of these migrants, what they went through, the reasons why they had to leave their motherland, what Australia offered and more importantly the huge contribution they have made to make the multicultural Australia of today.

These interviews are on the OHA SA/NT Web gateway http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/category/greek-migration/

Postscript
One of our interviews is going to be used by the National Archives in an exhibition which is going to tour Australia for the next few years. They were fascinated by her story and have asked to meet the lady concerned and interview her further.
Appendix B: Examples of master letters for use by interviewers for oral history projects

Examples of correspondence
Following are examples of six letters that follow the oral history interview process. They can be adapted for use with interviewees in different projects.

MASTER - letter of invitation

<date>

<name>
<address>

Dear <name>

In conjunction with the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society, <I or we> are conducting an oral history project with the theme, Men at Work, concentrating our work in the Scott Creek district. As part of the gathering of material and suggestions, we would like to interview you as part of this project.

While you are no doubt familiar with the richness of written history, oral history also provides an opportunity to enrich our understanding and enjoyment of history. Beth M Robertson defines oral history in the following terms:

*Oral history is a picture of the past in peoples’ own words. Oral history is as old as humanity but today it is associated with recorded interviews with people about their memories.*

She outlines the practical process involved with Oral History in the following way:

- A recorded interview in question-and-answer format
- Conducted by an interviewer who has some knowledge of the subject to be discussed
- With a knowledgeable interviewee speaking from first-hand experience
- On subjects of historical interest
- That is made accessible to other researchers.

<I or one of us> will ring you during this week to discuss the possibility of your participation and to fully explain what would be involved. While we are enthusiastic about the project it is important to acknowledge that it is your choice whether you wish to proceed.

<I or We> will look forward to speaking with you very soon. If you would like to contact <me or either one of us> prior to that call, <my or our> contact details are listed below.

<My or Our> best wishes

<insert signature or both signatures if possible>

<Insert contact details>  <Insert contact details of co-worker>
MASTER - after introductory meeting

<date>
<name>
<address>

Dear <name>

<I or We> enjoyed meeting you on <date> and very much appreciated your hospitality and discussion. <add anything personal>

<Colleague’s name and I are or I am> looking forward to our first recording session planned for <time, day, date, place>. <We or I> think it will be an interesting story to be recorded as part of the history of the Mount Lofty Districts and feel privileged to be hearing this aspect of your life.

Reflecting on our first meeting, <I or We> had a sense that several factors would be of immense interest for the Mount Lofty Districts’ history and it may be challenging to fully honour the diversity and detail. I wonder, therefore, if it may be useful to focus the interview on the following broad categories:
(For example:
Your experience as a <focus activity>: For example
$list$
What you enjoyed most about your involvement with <aspect of work>: For example
$list$
<Insert other>: For example
$list$

You may also have more very beneficial ideas and we can talk about them all when we get together on the <insert date>. What is most important is that your story is told and recorded in the way that you would want. Our role is to be the facilitator of the interview.

While I anticipate that the recording equipment will be set up, I will need about 10 minutes to ensure that you can be heard and understood on the machine. We will also need to go through some fundamentals before starting the more free-flowing aspects of the recording, such as gaining consent and recording your family demographics.

If for any reason you change your mind or need to reschedule, my contact details are listed below.

My best wishes

$insert signature$

$insert contact details> <insert co-workers name and details>
MASTER after 1st interview

<date>
<name>
<address>

Dear <name>

<I or We> enjoyed interviewing you on <date> and, as previously, appreciated your generous hospitality. <I or We> enjoyed hearing your story and believe it makes a significant contribution to the Mount Lofty Districts overall history. <I or We> feel very privileged to have recorded it – thank you.

As <I or we> discussed with you, the process from this point may take several months, and occurs in the following way:

- The Archival Field Officer, Oral History, State Library of South Australia, will arrange for your recorded interview to be transferred to an mp3 file.
- The recorded interview will be transferred into a verbatim transcript. This is a longer process requiring a transcriber to record your interview as a written copy.

Once we get this information back, <I or we> will ring you to make another time to meet and:

- make sure that you are happy with what has been recorded
- make any changes to the written transcript that you would like to make.

A copy of the audio recording and amended (if required) transcript will be:

- sent to you as part of your personal history
- archived with the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society’s records in the Coventry Library, Stirling
- placed in the J D Somerville Oral History Collection in the State Library of South Australia.

<I or We> look forward to meeting again within the next few of months. Until then,
<my or our> best wishes

<insert signature>
Dear <insert name>

The audio file and written transcript of your interview recorded on the <insert date> have been received from the State Library of South Australia (SLSA) and the transcriber. Having listened to the audio recording and read the transcript I feel very fortunate to have your articulate and thoughtful recollections on record.

Would you mind reading through the transcript to verify its content - I find it helpful to listen to the audio recording as I read the transcript as it gives another dimension to the written word. Using a pen, could you correct any mistakes you may find in the transcript and record it by hand on the document itself. <If appropriate insert You will notice that I have made several corrections already>. Any mistakes will hopefully be minor and comprise primarily names of people and places or certain dates. The audio file, as you know, will remain as it is recorded and is yours to keep.

I will ring you in a couple of weeks (or you could ring me on <insert phone number>) and make arrangements to come and collect the transcript and return it to the transcriber for final editing before the transcript, along with the audio file, is placed in the JD Somerville Oral History Collection in the State Library of South Australia, as well as the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society’s archives in the Coventry Library, Stirling..

If you have any queries at all, regarding the process or procedure, please do not hesitate to contact me and I will do whatever I can to assist.

My warm wishes

Insert contact details  <Insert co-workers name and details>
Dear <insert name>

< I or We> appreciated our last meeting and your warm hospitality on <day and date>. <I or We> feel fortunate to have met you and had the opportunity to record your experiences as part of the history of the Mount Lofty Districts.

A summary of your transcript will now be written and the summary, audio file and transcript will:

- be archived with the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society's records in the Coventry Library, Stirling
- be placed in the JD Somerville Oral History Collection in the State Library of South Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity to record your story – the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society as well as the State Library will benefit from having your experiences on record as part of the State's history.

<My or Our> best wishes

<insert signature/s>
Dear <insert name>

Enclosed is the final transcript of your oral history interview. I hope that you are as happy with the end result as I am.

The next part of the process is a summary of the transcript that <insert name> will write. The summary will accompany the full transcript and an audio (mp3) file, all of which will become a memorable record in the JD Somerville Collection in the State Library of South Australia as well as the Mount Lofty Districts Historical Society archives.

<Insert personal statement e.g. It has been a pleasure to meet you, <insert name>, and I thank you for your generosity of spirit demonstrated during this whole process.>

If you have any queries at all please do not hesitate to contact me.

My warm wishes

<Insert contact details> <insert co-worker’s name>
Appendix C: State Library of SA forms used for cataloguing oral history interviews

J D SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

CONDITIONS OF USE FORM FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS
Person interviewed assigns copyright to Libraries Board of South Australia

Both you (the person interviewed) and the Libraries Board of South Australia own copyright in your tape recorded interview. This includes the rights to edit, reproduce, publish (including electronic publication on the Internet), broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt the interview. This form asks you to give your copyright to the Libraries Board so that the State Library can make the interview available to the public. However, this form also lets you put restrictions on how the interview will be used and it does not stop you from reproducing or publishing the interview yourself.

I (person interviewed) .................................................................................. assign to the Libraries Board of South Australia any copyright owned by me in the interview recorded on (date) ............................................ by (interviewer) ................................................... on the following conditions: (cross out any part that does not apply)

- No conditions
- Anyone wanting to edit, reproduce, publish (including electronic publication on the Internet), broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt the interview either during my lifetime or before (date) ............................................ must get my written permission first, unless reasonable attempts to contact me are unsuccessful. (I understand that I may send change of address notices to the Oral History Officer, State Library of SA, North Terrace, Adelaide.)
- (Other:)

I understand that the interview will be held in the J D Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library of South Australia where it will be used for research, publication or broadcast by the Libraries Board of SA and the public under these conditions.

I also understand that I will receive a copy of the tape recording of the interview and any transcript that is made, and that I am granted a licence (permission) to reproduce, publish, broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt the interview myself.

Signature of person interviewed ............................................................................
Address......................................................................................................................
Telephone number ........................................................................ Dated .................
Signature of interviewer ...........................................................................................
## Oral History Project Summary Form

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<th><strong>Funding support provided by:</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Project theme(s)</strong></th>
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Return completed version of this form to the State Library of South Australia’s Archival Field Officer: tonia.bradstreet@slsa.sa.gov.au (telephone 8207 7260)
**STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

**Oral History Interview Summary**

A separate form is required for each interview.
The form must accompany any recordings sent to the State Library.

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References


*Oral History Toolkit* 1999 accessed online on 25 February 2016 at [http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/index.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/index.html) Do History was developed and maintained by the Film Study Center at Harvard University and is hosted and maintained by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University.


Robertson, Beth M 2006 *Oral History Handbook*, Oral History Association of Australia (South Australian Branch) Inc


*Where else can I go for training and advice?* Accessed online on 25 February 2016 at [https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/links.html](https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/links.html) The East Midlands Oral History Archive provides training in oral history to people in the East Midlands and the world via a variety of web resources.
Thanks

Thanks to members of the OHA SA/NT for their contribution to this guide: Tonia Bradstreet, Karen George, Peter Hackworth, Alison McDougall, Leeston McNab, Susan Mann, John Mannion, Catherine Murphy, Madeleine Regan, Christeen Schoepf and Sally Stephenson.

We hope this guide is a useful tool for those interested in oral history.

June Edwards
President OHA SA/NT
February 2016

For further information about Oral History in South Australia and the Northern Territory, please contact: http://oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au/contact-us/