



# Getting Started with Oral History Interviews

by Wesley Fryer – Updated 21 October 2008

Oklahoma Heritage Association - <http://oklahomaheritage.com>

Interviewing a family member or friend about their past experiences can be a great way to learn about history as well as preserve history for others. This short guide provides an overview of how you can conduct oral history interviews and share them on the Internet with others.

## 1. Select Your Story Subject and Prepare

Select a family member, friend, or other older adult and ask them if they are comfortable sharing about their life with you, having you record their story, and share it on the Internet with others. As your story subject to reserve at least an hour for you to conduct the interview together. If possible, ask them to bring photographs, personal letters, or other items they would like to discuss and share. These items often encourage memories and provoke interesting stories.

## 2. Interview Questions and Tips

In advance of the interview, find out about the person's background and experiences. Use the Internet and library resources to read about the history and events they experienced so you will be able to ask better questions. Pick a quiet, comfortable place to conduct the interview. Prepare questions in advance. Don't begin the interview with questions about painful or controversial subjects. Keep your questions short! Ask open-ended questions rather than closed questions which can be answered with a simple yes or no. Ask follow-up questions, inviting your subject to elaborate in detail. Samples might include:

- When did that happen?
- Did that happen to you?
- What did you think about that?
- What are the steps in doing that?

## 3. Use a Digital Audio Recorder

Portable, digital audio recorders are now available for less than \$100. Purchase or borrow a recorder which records DIGITALLY. This means it will NOT use a tape, but will plug directly into your computer to transfer the recorded files. Look for a battery operated recorder, and make sure you have a FULLY charged battery when you start. The Olympus WS-110 or WS-321 recorders are outstanding.

## 4. Edit Your Audio Recording

Free software like Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>) can be used to import recorded audio from a digital recorder and add additional voice narration. Depending on the format used by your digital recorder, files may need to be converted. The Olympus WS-321M recorder shown here records in Windows Media Audio (WMA) format, which must be converted using a free program like Switch ([www.nch.com.au/switch](http://www.nch.com.au/switch)) into WAV or MP3 before importing into Audacity. If you have a Macintosh computer, you can also use GarageBand software (free) to edit your recording.

## 5. Share Your Story Online

A variety of different websites are available to post and share your stories online for free. The Internet Archive is one example ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)). After publishing your story, email the link to your family and friends, or post it on your blog or other website.

