

# AMERICAN RED CROSS

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## HISTORICAL RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

AMERICAN RED CROSS MUSEUM • HAZEL BRAUGH RECORDS CENTER & ARCHIVES • HISTORIAN  
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### GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING AMERICAN RED CROSS ORAL HISTORY

By  
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Historian

#### Introduction

My first encounter with oral history occurred in the 1960s when I interviewed my grandmother about her experiences during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. As a cheap reel-to-reel tape recorder whirled between us, she recalled what was for her the most memorable event of her lifetime—

How, seven months pregnant with my father, she had rushed panic-stricken from her own apartment to the comfort and safety of her parents' home nearby after the earthquake had struck.

How her father, a captain in the San Francisco Fire Department, was gone from the home for days fighting fires and directing the cleanup.

How my grandparents were separated for over six weeks as my grandfather, a member of the National Guard, was called up to patrol homeless camps in Golden Gate Park.

Then, as a printer, he was sent to Los Angeles to work on San Francisco publications whose presses had been destroyed by the fire.

At the time I was unaware of oral history as a technique for gathering first-hand historical information. But I recognized immediately the value of what I had done. If I had not recorded my grandmother's story, an important chapter of my family's history would have been lost forever. Today, long after my grandmother's death, the sound of her voice, its intonations and verbal mannerisms, vividly bring her presence back to life. For those too young to know her, her interview puts them in touch with an enthralling chapter of our family history. To share the interview with a wider audience, I gave a copy to the University of California's Bancroft Library, where it joins a marvelous collection of oral histories devoted to California's past, available to researchers and the general public alike.

Since that early effort, I have conducted many other oral history interviews. Some have been with important public figures and covered significant historical events. However, I have never lost the sense of excitement I felt with that first experience. Interviewing my grandmother, I realized that the foremost responsibility of an oral historian is to help others give expression to the important events of their lives. For me this will always be an exciting activity and a special privilege.

Today, the American Red Cross places a renewed emphasis on history with the introduction of a corporate-wide historical policy expressing a strong commitment to preserving our past. It acknowledges that every chapter and unit has played and continues to play an important role in local communities, as well as on the national and international scenes. Every chapter and unit possesses its own heroes and heroines with significant stories to tell. In my view, there is no better way to illustrate the history of the Red Cross and to capture the personalities of its players than by conducting oral histories.

In order to encourage you to think about initiating this inspiring activity, here are my responses to some frequently asked questions.

### **What is oral history?**

Oral history is a means for obtaining and preserving people's memories of events. Typically, in the oral history setting, an interviewer asks questions of an interviewee who has been a participant or eyewitness to an event or series of events of historical importance or bears a close relationship to such events. Their exchange is recorded on audio or video tape. A transcript, summary, index, or other type of finding aid is usually made of the interview afterwards. Tapes and all related materials are carefully preserved as documents for use by, among others, colleagues and community members, students, researchers, writers, and producers of media presentations.

### **Why should I be interested in doing oral histories?**

Every chapter has played an important role in its community and has a unique history to tell. Each has heroes among its volunteers and staff who have made significant contributions to the welfare of the local community and, quite possibly, beyond. Oral history is a dynamic and efficient way to collect and preserve this history, capturing it in the voices and with the images of the people who actually lived it. Unless an effort is made to preserve a chapter's history, it will pass without acknowledgment into oblivion.

### **What are the benefits to my chapter of doing oral history?**

At the most basic level, the mere fact that you are doing oral histories signifies that your chapter has important stories to tell. It is also an excellent way to honor the services of outstanding chapter paid and volunteer staff. Oral history encourages your current

volunteers and staff to see themselves as participants within a much larger historical context. It helps them realize they are part of a tradition of service and accomplishment stretching far back in time. An oral history project serves as a focal point for other historical activities you undertake in line with the Historical Policy approved by the American Red Cross Board of Governors in 1998 (see Appendix A). Excerpts from oral histories in the form of text and soundbites can energize your educational and public presentations and be effectively incorporated in your website. They are also suitable for use by producers of all types of media programming. As such, they are powerful publicity tools for your chapter and its activities. Finally, you can use oral histories effectively for staff and volunteer recruitment and orientation purposes.

### **What will it cost?**

Rule of thumb is that you spend as much as you are able to obtain the best quality sound and pictures possible. The most expensive part of doing oral history is the purchase or rental of recording equipment. Professionals spend thousands of dollars a day on crew and equipment to achieve exceptionally high quality recordings. However, you can obtain acceptable quality recordings by purchasing, renting, or borrowing equipment that falls within the several hundred dollar cost range. Rather than hiring crews, train volunteers to operate the equipment. Other expenses typically include personnel to research, interview, and process recordings (again, you may use volunteers) and incidentals such as office supplies and storage space. (For more detailed discussion of recording equipment, see Appendix B.)

### **How do I get started?**

Although it is likely everyone in your chapter has a story to tell, the best oral history projects are ones with a specific theme. The starting point is to determine what this oral history theme will be. It might be as simple as your chapter's "heroes," or it might be a major event in your unit's history, or a chronology of events that fall within certain years. The next step is to select the person or group to assume responsibility for the project. In some cases, this will be one enthusiast. In other cases, it will involve teamwork. (Oral historians recommend the appointment of an advisory committee to define, direct, and take overall responsibility for a project.) The next step is to select your participants.

### **Whom to interview?**

Once you've determined your theme, it's fairly easy to decide whom to interview. You seek people with the most knowledge of, and the most interesting perspectives on, your theme. This is likely to include "admirals and generals" but you should not overlook a sampling, at least, of the "troops." The most valuable stories often come from people less attached to official versions of events or whose vantage points give them unusual

insights. It helps if interviewees are good narrators, capable of expressing themselves well and recalling events in detail.

### **Who should conduct the interviews?**

Select people who know, or are willing to learn, the history of your chapter and your oral history theme. They should also be willing to learn as much as they can about the relevant aspects of an interviewee's background. It is essential for interviewers to be good listeners, able to raise questions spontaneously in response to statements an interviewee makes. Extraordinary stories may go uncovered if an interviewer never deviates from a set of predetermined questions. An interviewer must also possess the self-control necessary to remain silent except when asking a question. Interviewer interjections and laughter mar a recording. Interviewers must also remember the goal is to elicit information from interviewees, not to expand on their own experiences and points of view. You might be tempted to put two old cronies together to talk about "the good old days" but you're likely to end up with a lot of friendly chatter that lacks both direction and historical value.

### **How to conduct an oral history interview?**

There is no single formula for conducting oral history interviews. Much depends on your theme, the personalities involved, and the time and equipment available. There are, however, a few general principles that must be observed to obtain worthwhile results.

#### Good preparation

It is essential for an interviewer to know enough about the theme and an interviewee's background to structure and conduct a meaningful interview. Otherwise some questions will seem inappropriate or may fail to elicit valuable information. An interviewer will look and feel dumb and the interviewee will be justified in feeling insulted by the lack of preparation. Often, preparation of a set of standardized questions is useful, particularly when a number of people are being interviewed about a common subject or several interviewers are involved. Having a set of questions, however, should not prevent interviewers from pursuing other, often spontaneous, lines of inquiry

#### Operation of the equipment

Oral historians normally operate their own equipment when they are conducting audio only interviews. This is relatively easy since it only involves a recorder and two microphones. The most apprehensive moments I have had doing oral histories, however, almost invariably involve operation of the equipment. Becoming familiar with equipment in advance is an essential part of preparation. With the introduction of small, easy-to-operate video camcorders, it is now possible for oral historians to conduct video interviews alone as well. This is complicated, however, since one's attention is divided among the interview itself, the quality of the sound reproduction,

and all aspects of picture composition (often requiring camera movement when an interviewee shifts position). In most cases it is advisable to have someone other than the interviewer operate the camera although this tends to reduce the intimacy of the interview situation. Certainly a camera operator must be as unobtrusive as possible. (Local cable companies and educational institutions are excellent sources for advice on media production and equipment. Some may be in a position to loan equipment and operators as well.)

### Finding the right location

The best location for an interview is one where the interviewee feels most comfortable. This is usually a person's home or office. It must be a quiet environment in order to ensure quality sound recordings. Careful attention also needs to be paid to everything that will appear on screen. I trained myself to examine all parts of the picture frame although one's natural inclination is to focus only on the speaker. Background elements that distract attention must be avoided, such as a potted plant appearing to grow out of an interviewee's head, a window curtain swaying in a breeze, or a dirty light switch on the wall. Ideally, someone should visit the recording site beforehand to select the most desirable interview setting. Avoid conducting interviews out-of-doors because of sound problems, such as traffic noise and wind, and harsh lighting effects from the sun.

### Length of interviews

How much time you devote to an interview depends on the scope of your theme and the value of the interviewee's observations. I have found that an individual interview session should not go much beyond two hours. If it does, fatigue sets in, as much for the interviewer as for the interviewee. I like taking short breaks during a session to relax and confer with the interviewee about our progress. Since I use two-sided, 60-minute cassettes for audio interviews, we break every half-hour. I would never go a full two hours without a break even though some video formats allow you to do that and more. I have occasionally done two hours in the morning and another hour or so in the afternoon but that is exhausting.

### Ethical issues and release forms

Everyone doing oral histories has an important responsibility to protect the rights and privileges of the interviewee as well as themselves and those about whom comments are made in the interview. Both participants should sign "release forms" which establish ownership of the recordings. Most likely ownership will be assigned to your chapter or unit. In some cases, interviewees may ask to put restrictions on their interviews, or portions thereof, and these requests should be accepted if reasonable. Although it rarely happens, participants can make defamatory or libelous statements for which you would be held responsible. Care should be taken to avoid the recording of such statements. (The Oral History Association pamphlet, *Oral History and the Law*, is an excellent primer for this potentially sensitive area. See the Bibliography.)

## **What needs to be done after an interview is finished?**

Two steps should follow an interview. First, a copy of the original tapes is made for listening or viewing purposes. I call this a “use copy.” Original tapes are stored away for use only in making additional copies or for incorporation in media presentations. (Ideally, original tapes are stored under optimal archival conditions: in a climate controlled environment with a steady temperature of about 60 degrees and 50-percent humidity.) The second step is to prepare a record of the contents of the interview. A word-for-word transcript is best but it is time-consuming to produce (about five hours of transcribing for every hour of recorded interview). Alternatives are a general summary, an index, or, my favorite, a “tape log” which lists subject matter and tape location in chronological order for major points of the interview. (See Appendix C for an example.)

## **Where do I go for more information?**

I highly recommend two publications. The best general introduction to oral history is Donald A. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. 265 pp. Hardbound, \$26.95; Softbound, \$14.95). It provides thorough coverage of oral history procedures and standards in an easy to use Q-&-A format. An excellent guide for setting up an oral history project is the Oral History Association’s *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*, available free of charge from the OHA’s website: <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>. (See the Bibliography for a more in depth oral history reading list.)

Regional oral history associations and state and local historical societies are excellent sources of advice and guidance. They welcome others with similar interests. Frequently such groups offer oral history training workshops. (See Appendix D for a list of organizations and examples of the resources some offer.)

We in the American Red Cross Historical Resources Department also welcome your questions and concerns and we look forward to learning about your oral history projects.

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## **Appendix A. American Red Cross Historical Policy**

The Board of Governors approved the following Historical Policy in 1998.

All historical buildings, documents, general records, letters, diaries, scrapbooks, photographs, films, audio and video tapes, phonograph records, original posters and paintings, books, publications, uniforms, sculptures, plaques and any other such historical resources are valuable to the American Red Cross. All such historical resources of value are the property of the Corporation. Volunteers, paid staff and all Units shall preserve items of value for the historic collections of the Corporation and its Units. Before any unit may modify, sell, destroy or otherwise dispose of historical resources of significant value, the unit shall obtain the approval of the national Headquarters Unit, designated by Corporate Management as responsible for the preservation of historical resources: the Historical Resources Department. All historical resources shall be preserved and maintained consistent with Corporate Regulations. [Board of Governors Policy Manual, Part One, 3.2.4 Historical Resources]

## **Appendix B. Recording Equipment**

Anyone contemplating the purchase of recording equipment is faced with a baffling number of products and different recording formats: analog, digital, S-VHS, 8 mm, etc. Selecting equipment can be a daunting experience and there is always the risk that the format you select today will quickly become obsolete tomorrow. The strongest advice I can give you is to find a reputable dealer who will guide you through the process of equipment selection. Here are some basics to keep in mind.

### Audio equipment

The audio components you will want are a recorder that is capable of good quality sound reproduction with inputs for one or two external microphones, and at least one quality microphone (preferably two). Do not use a recorder's built-in microphone. The sound quality is too poor. I use an analog recorder (a Marantz PMD-101 that sells for \$500) and two lapel-type microphones (Sony ECM-44B lavalieres that sell for \$165 each). I record on high quality, 60-minute audiocassettes (Maxell XLII, about \$2.20 each). Several digital formats are on the market but none as yet has become a clear-cut industry standard for the future.

### Video equipment

It is essential that you select a camera-recorder (called a "camcorder") capable of fairly high picture quality with at least one external microphone input (such camcorders will most likely fall in the \$600-\$800 price range), plus as good a microphone as you can afford (prices start at about \$40). You will need a tripod (\$30-\$200). Depending upon how well the camera operates in low light levels, you may be advised to purchase or rent lights (a huge price range exists from consumer fixtures costing a few dollars to professional lights costing several hundred dollars).

## Appendix C. Tape Log

Here is an example of the kind of finding aid I use to summarize the content of my interviews.

### AMERICAN RED CROSS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION Tape Log

Interviewee: [name]  
Subject: Experiences during World War II  
Date of interview: [date]  
Location: [place of residence]  
Interviewer: Brien R. Williams, American Red Cross Historian

Recording format: DVM60 cassettes. VHS T-120 use copy.  
Total running time: 1:29:00

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00:00:18 Introduction.

00:00:45 background before WWII.  
schooling.  
participating in ARC Louisville, KY 1937 flood relief.  
work at local chapter in North Carolina.

00:02:20 What brought you into the war effort?  
describes circumstances leading up to war effort.  
in training in NY.  
departure in very cold weather. heavy laden with gear.  
on ship. chased by submarine.  
arrival in UK . . .

## **Appendix D. Related Organizations**

### National Organizations

American Association for State and Local History  
1717 Church Street  
Nashville, TN 37203-2991  
Phone: (615) 320-3203  
Fax: (615) 327-9013  
E-Mail: [history@aslh.org](mailto:history@aslh.org)  
<http://www.aslh.org/contents.htm>

Website includes valuable lists of state and regional historical associations.

Oral History Association  
Dickinson College  
P. O. Box 1773  
Carlisle, PA 17013  
Telephone: 717-245-1036  
Fax: 717-245-1046  
E-mail: [OHA@dickinson.edu](mailto:OHA@dickinson.edu)  
<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>

### State and Regional Oral History Organizations

Chicago Oral History Roundtable.  
Michigan Oral History Association\*  
Montana Oral History Association  
New England Association of Oral History\*  
Northwest Oral History Association  
Oral History Association of Minnesota  
Oral History–Mid-Atlantic Region  
Southeast Oral History Organization  
Southwest Oral History Association  
Texas Oral History Association\*  
(starred organizations have websites with useful information, accessible via the OHA homepage)

### Local Organizations

Check telephone directories and Internet for local historical societies.

## Bibliography

### Highly recommended texts

*Doing Oral History*. By Donald A. Ritchie. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. 265 pp. Hardbound, \$26.95; Softbound, \$14.95.

Thorough coverage of oral history procedures and standards presented in an easy Q & A format.

*Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*. Second edition. Baylor University: Oral History Association, 1991. 16 pp. Softbound, \$5.00.

This publication has been adopted by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the standard for conducting oral history. Also available free on the OHA website at <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>

*Oral History and the Law*. By John A. Neuenschwander. Second edition, revised and enlarged. Baylor University: Oral History Association, 1993. 53 pp. Softbound, \$8.00.

Written for the layperson, this pamphlet reviews legal issues involved in doing oral history. Appendices contain sample legal and copyright forms.

*Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. By Willa K. Baum. Third revised edition. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995. 68 pp. Softbound, \$12.95.

A less detailed text and still highly regarded although it is less thorough than the Ritchie text and somewhat out of date in terms of technology.

### Specialized texts

*Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. By Valerie Raleigh Yow. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994. 284 pp. Hardcover, \$48.00; Softbound, \$21.95.

Intended for college and graduate level students in history and social sciences.

*A Practical Introduction to Videohistory*. First edition. Edited by Terri A. Schorzman. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1993. 243 pp. Hardbound, \$30.75.

A detailed discussion of the Smithsonian Institution's pioneering Videohistory Program from a variety of perspectives.