

A
Very Practical Guide
to the
Pursuit and Enjoyment
of

ORAL HISTORY



Vancouver Historical Society

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by
The Oral History Committee
Vancouver Historical Society



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PREFACE

The Oral History Committee of the Vancouver Historical Society gathered 41 interviews in its neighbourhood oral history project, *Voices of False Creek and the Fairview Slopes*. During the course of the project the Committee had to consider new ideas, develop new skills and procedures, and make various decisions. In the following pages we have outlined what we learned, in the hope that others undertaking oral history projects may benefit from our experience.

THE ORAL TRADITION

Like other great seaports of the world, Vancouver has a history rich in oral tradition: the coming of Captain Vancouver up Burrard Inlet to the village of Snaaq; Gassy Jack Deighton's saloon in Maple Tree Square; the Great Fire which largely wiped out the city. The city was incorporated in 1886 and one hundred years of retelling has made such stories the stuff of legend. But unlike London, Amsterdam, New York, or even Montreal and Quebec, much of Vancouver's early history is still within living memory, and that is why the collecting of oral history is of special importance in Vancouver.

For, rich and varied as is our past, much of our oral history must be forever lost if we do not act now to preserve it. Many segments of Vancouver society have never had sufficient sense of their own importance to preserve their records, nor have scholars, until recently, attached any importance to them. Ethnic groups, women, and working people; political parties, church congregations, and sports clubs; local businesses and certain trades and crafts — all have contributed to the growth and development of the complex cultural, economic, and social entity called Vancouver. But the stories of those contributions have most often gone unrecorded.

Historians are now recognizing the importance of preserving the minutia of everyday life through taped interviews, and they are finally accepting oral history as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. In Vancouver, oral history has given shape and substance to shadowy events of half a century ago, and drawn attention to people who otherwise would have had no historical existence. Understanding this, the Oral History Committee of the Vancouver Historical Society undertook to preserve on tape the history of a quickly disappearing Vancouver neighbourhood. We knew that, with the Vancouver Centennial approaching, many others would be interested in embarking on similar projects if they knew how to go about it. And so we decided that, in addition to collecting taped interviews, we would offer our project as a model for those who would themselves like to collect oral history on tape. This brochure is based on our own experiences in setting up and carrying out an oral history project.

SETTING UP THE PROJECT

Our initial step was to establish the goal of our project. We recognized that there are different types of oral history interviews. Some focus on individual biography, some supplement information about historical events and others deal with a single subject such as child-rearing or the forest industry. We decided to concentrate on a geographical area of Vancouver that has undergone drastic changes within the past ten years. Our project, *Voices of False Creek and the Fairview Slopes*, would record the memories of those who shared a certain industrial and residential milieu that no longer exists.

Preparing for the interviews proved to be more work than we expected. Based on our experience, we suggest that any group undertaking a neighbourhood oral history project take the following approach:

- In planning your project you should consider the end result. Will the interviews you gather be used for a book or other publication? Are the interviews to be used in an audio-visual program, broadcast, or to accompany displays or walking tours? If so, you will have to ensure there is good sound quality. Are the interviews being gathered for future research? In that event you will have to make arrangements to deposit them in an archive, library or similar institution. Our tapes, we decided, should be deposited in the University of British Columbia's Special Collections Division, where researchers could make full use of them.
- Will your oral history project duplicate or supplement information already recorded or are you creating new material? Find out what other projects exist and how your project will fit in. Your librarian will have lists for you to check.
- Draw up some general guidelines providing a list of topics, issues and events for interviewers to use in planning their research and questions. In tracing the development of False Creek, we were not only studying particular topics such as the sawmilling and shipbuilding industries, but noting the changes in them over a period of time and how they affected the neighbourhood.

- Once you have determined the parameters of your project, you will need some information about your topic:
 - Walk through the neighbourhood to identify major physical features.
 - Visit libraries that have good local history collections. Read general histories of the area, old newspaper clippings, and specific books on your topic.
 - Consult archives for collections of private letters, diaries, business papers and contracts. Photographs will help stimulate the memories of interviewees.

- Remember that librarians and archivists will be pleased to help you unearth many unfamiliar sources of information. For our project we used the resources of the Vancouver City Archives and the newspaper clipping files at the Vancouver Public Library.

- After you have finished your research it is a good idea to prepare a brief set of notes listing relevant dates, place names, events and people.

- The next step is to make a list of people who might serve as potential interviewees. We found a card file worked best. Friends, neighbours, and colleagues will have suggestions. Check elderly citizen associations such as retired teachers. Contact nursing homes. Old city directories may give you leads to those who lived in the neighbourhood. Professional, business, and trade associations may direct you to former members.

Oldham, Henry James

1887 Memory Lane, Vancouver, B.C.
tel: 731-1936

-Retired official of Columbia Lumber Co.,
an early industry of Granville Island.
-Recommended by J.P. Hammer,
President of Columbia Lumber Co.

- Your file should contain such information as the name, address, and telephone number of the prospect, plus comments on the likely subject and scope of an interview. From this file you select a prospective narrator according to the priorities of your program as well as your own sense of his/her potential as a subject.
- While it is possible to interview older and former residents just for their reminiscences, a better interview can contribute to a specific topic. For example, in interviewing residents of the Fairview Slopes, we had to decide what aspect of their life to cover. Did we want them to talk about their whole story, or just about their life on the Fairview Slopes?

EQUIPMENT

At this point you should make sure that you have adequate equipment for taping interviews. All recordings should be made with the highest possible sound quality you can afford. Reel-to-reel tape recorders provide the best sound quality but they are expensive and cumbersome. A moderately priced cassette recorder will provide a clear recording, though it may pick up some background noise, and cassette tapes wear out more quickly. We recommend using a cassette recorder with an external cardioid microphone. This type of microphone picks up sounds in front of it, while minimizing background noise. Speakers should take care not to sit behind the mike.

The recorder should have:

- 1) standard controls, including a "pause" button
- 2) an end of tape signal
- 3) volume control
- 4) a tape counter for indexing tape contents
- 5) battery/AC power option.

Use 60-minute, low-noise cassettes.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Initial Contact

You are now ready to contact interviewees. Write or telephone a potential subject informing him of your project and your interest in talking to him. If the person agrees to see you, gather basic information and arrange for a preliminary meeting. This meeting is not a recording session, and you shouldn't commit yourself to a taped interview

before the session. Just say: "I'd like to talk to you about the subject."

A preliminary meeting gives you a chance to evaluate what the person knows and to decide whether you want to interview him or her on tapes. Some interviewers skip this step, preferring to try for a one-shot, spontaneous taping session, but this approach can be risky. The purpose of the preliminary session is to explain the nature of your project, to get acquainted and to develop a good working relationship with the interviewee. While chatting with the interviewee, take notes, which you can later use to compile a set of questions to guide you during the taping session. Ask to borrow photographs, letters, scrapbooks and any other material that might aid in your background research.

Use this occasion to demonstrate the equipment you will be using and to reassure the narrator that the taping session will be informal and not nearly as intimidating as a radio or television interview.

Check where electrical outlets are located and note possible sound interference (a refrigerator, traffic, or a squeaky chair). Make a note to bring an extension cord if necessary. If you must use batteries, remember to bring spares.

Scheduling and Setting Up the Interview

Your interview should be scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee. Since people are most relaxed in familiar surroundings, it's best to interview them at their home or office. A living room, which has sound absorbing material, is a good location.

If at all possible, avoid interviewing more than one person at a time. It is hard to maintain control over an interview involving two or more people and easy to miss opportunities to probe. And transcribing a multiple interview can be very difficult, to say the least. Ask spouses or friends to sit quietly if they must be present.

Plan to do only about an hour of recording per session. A rule of thumb is 20 to 30 items. Don't wear out the narrator — or yourself; interviewing requires strenuous concentration.

Before you start the interview do a sound test, checking the interviewee's voice, your voice and the acoustic environment. It's a good idea to sit at right angles to the narrator, so you can make eye contact, and also glance occasionally at the tape recorder to make sure it's operating properly. The recorder should be placed where it won't distract the narrator and away from the microphone (which could pick up the sound of the recorder's motor), but not hidden. Put it on soft material to reduce vibrations. You don't need to thrust the microphone in the narrator's face; most modern microphones pick up well at some distance. Ideally, you will have practised with the equipment beforehand, so you won't distract the narrator by fiddling during the taping session.

Conducting the Interview

Your research and the question set you prepared from the notes taken during the preliminary meeting will provide a loose framework for the taped interview. Don't give the interviewee the questions in advance if you want a natural sounding tape; at most, provide a set of topics. To get the subject to relax, engage in small talk before turning on the tape recorder. There is definitely a knack to good interviewing. Part of it has to do with the way you ask questions. We found that it's best to start the actual interview with personal questions, which the narrator can easily answer and which makes her confident that she has the information you want. Some other tips:

- Don't ask leading questions. Don't say "You didn't enjoy working in False Creek, did you?", say: "What was it like working in False Creek?"
- Don't ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no."
- Be concrete. Ask about specific events or experiences: "Tell me about the fire in the lumberyard." Get physical descriptions: "What did the fireboat look like?" Elicit emotions: "How did you feel about the strike?" Remember that newsclippings, photographs and other props can stimulate memories.
- Keep in mind that you're there to get information, not to correct the speaker. Let the speaker say her piece. If she strays, let her have her say, then guide her back with a phrase such as "you were saying", or "returning to."

Use a separate cassette (or cassettes) for each person interviewed. If you don't use a second side, leave it blank and label it as such. Don't use it for a second interview.

It's important to keep the future listener in mind when taping. Introduce each interviewing session with a simple statement such as: "This is an interview with Mr. Jack Smith in his home on May 12, 1985. The interviewer is Mary Burns." Try to get precise information on the tape: full names (and their spelling), dates, places and relationships. It helps to make a word list of every proper name mentioned while the taping is going on. Translate gestures into words. Keep your voice off the tape except to ask questions. Don't laugh, don't repeat 'yes, yes', and so on. Use facial expressions to encourage the speaker. Stop if you have to (use the "pause" button on the recorder); for example, the interviewer signals "stop" if the phone rings or to point out to the narrator that his drumming fingers (or other noisy mannerisms) will be picked up by the microphone. Announce the end of the interview or let your listener know if it is to be continued on another tape.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Documentation

Once you have finished the interview, remove the safety tabs if you are using cassettes, make sure that each tape is numbered and that each tape and its container is labelled with the name of the narrator, name of the interviewer, and date.

If you haven't already done so, the end of the interview is a good time to get the narrator to sign a tape release agreement giving permission for use of the tape and indicating any restrictions.

Before you leave, check your word list with the interviewee, comment encouragingly on the value of the taping session and make an appointment for the next session, if you need one.

Each interview and each tape should be numbered. For example tape 3-2 would be the second tape of the third interview. A list of tapes should be kept, noting these numbers and the name of the person interviewed, the title or general subject of the tape, the name of the interviewer, date and location of interview and length

of playing time. Future users will scan this list to decide which tapes are of interest for their purpose.

A separate worksheet for each tape will give more detail: name, address, and birthdate of the person interviewed, location where interview was recorded (not only address, but room – for example, kitchen or office). A summary of all the specific topics, persons, places or periods of time are listed in the order mentioned. The tape footage covering each of these topics may also be noted to facilitate referring to any particular section of the tape. The worksheet should also list any pictures or documents which accompany the original tape.

Making the Tape Available to Others

Each tape should be copied, so that the original may be kept safe from loss or damage, while the copies may be used without worry. Someone in your group may have the equipment to do this, or you may want to have it done by a tape duplication service. These are listed in the yellow pages under "Recording Service – Sound and Video".

After the trouble you have taken to produce a unique heritage record, you will want to be sure that the original tapes are kept in a place where they will be preserved safely and in good condition, and will be accessible to future generations. This place must be dry, fireproof, and have a steady, moderate temperature.

If your group has a permanent office, the originals may be kept there, along with your tape inventory and outlines, and any photographs, drawings, or other material you have collected. You might wish to discuss with your local librarian the possibility of putting them on permanent deposit in the library. Since you want to preserve your tape originals you might supply the library with copies for public use. When tapes are catalogued in the library's collection, future researchers on your topic will be aware of the information your project will make available to them.



FURTHER READING

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Cassidy, Maureen

Local history in B.C.: a guide to researching, writing and publishing for the non-professional. *Victoria, B.C.: British Columbia Heritage Trust, 1983. 36p.*

Davis, Cullom

Oral history: from tape to type. *Chicago: American Library Association, 1977. 141p.*

Kyvig, David E.

Nearby history: exploring the past around you. *Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1982. 300p.*

Oral history: basic techniques / Jane McCracken, editor. Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, 1974. 20p.

Voices: a guide to oral history / edited by Derek Reimer, David Mattison and Allen W. Specht. Victoria, B.C.: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Sound and Moving Image Division, 1984. 74p.

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