

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
HORACE M. ALBRIGHT TRAINING CENTER
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PI-10

LIVING HISTORY - HOW TO RECORD IT

History is usually thought of in the past tense. That is probably why so many valuable historical records are lost when they might have been saved by someone who wanted to preserve the history of the moment. Persons actually connected with historical places and events can "live" in areas of the National Park Service; that is, if a record is made of them. Also, recordings of the reflections of Indians or other oldtimers may reveal much concerning the existing archeology or perhaps the botany of an area.

For instance, President Eisenhower lives at Gettysburg. A candid and informal chat by him on what the Battlefield means to him, and what impresses him in it, if recorded in his own voice would be a historical record of interest in the future. Listening to the reminiscences of one of Thomas Edison's sons concerning the Edison Laboratory or an event in Edison's life would be of great interest to a visitor to Edison Laboratory National Monument. The sound of Mrs. Roosevelt's voice describing a room in the Hyde Park home would be a historical record of surpassing interest to future generations of visitors--unmatched by any other interpretive device. The voice of one of the last of the C and O Canal barge operators would be another historical record.

To provide such records of living history small transistorized recorders may be obtained. The Norelco Continental 100 and the Mohawk Midgetape Chief 400 readily satisfy the need. With such recorders the operator is free to move about chatting with the one being interviewed, recording the descriptions and comments which come to the mind of the one interviewed. The recording would be done with the full knowledge of the person whose voice is to be used. The portable recorder of this type is used simply to provide the maximum freedom in which to conduct the interview, with the equipment playing its part inconspicuously so as to preserve as much as possible the spontaneity of the response.

With some practice and a little technical skill, tape recordings can thus be obtained which will be living history to future visitors to National Park Service areas.

I. Purposes of recorded interviews

- A. To secure data in durable form from the minds of non-specialists.
- B. To stimulate expression by the subject beyond that which would be obtained in a written statement.
- C. To record the voices of significant people for posterity.
- D. To preserve an oral tradition which might otherwise be lost.

II. The conditions of the interview

- A. Privacy - noise constitutes both a physical and a psychological interference.
- B. Technical preparation - the interviewer must be familiar with his equipment, and if possible, he should pretest the equipment at the interview site.
- C. Mental preparation - the interviewer should be completely familiar with the material to be covered. Ideally, he should commit to memory all questions.
- D. Permission - no recording should ever be made without permission.
- E. Concealment - the interview will often be more productive if the recording equipment is at least partially concealed.

III. The interview

- A. Introduction - the date, place, and names of the people speaking should be read on to the tape before the interview begins.
- B. Warmup - the first step in effective interviewing is to put the subject at ease, even if five minutes of tape are "wasted" in the process.
- C. Conversation - the early part of the interview should be used to "draw out" the subject. Props (maps, pictures, books, etc.) are useful for this stage.
- D. Silence - the interviewer should talk less than 10% of the time, and should avoid questions or statements which can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."
- E. Detailed information - after the interview is about half over, the interviewer should begin detailed, specific questioning for information that he needs.
- F. Conclusion - many subjects tire easily, so the interviewer should be prepared to end the interview at a moment's notice.

IV. Uses of historical tape

- A. Audiovisual use - ordinarily limited to very short re-recordings.
- B. Transcriptions - it is often desirable to get the conversation down on paper, especially if the interview produced significant information.
- C. Editing - NEVER edit historical tapes by cutting. Always use selective re-recording. "Unimportant" details may later become crucial.
- D. Permission - if the tape is to be used for any purpose other than a "study collection," make sure that you have permission to use it, as well as make it.