

How to Conduct an Oral History Interview for the Mill Valley Historical Society

Alison Owings March 2008

The work can be divided into three sections:

- * Before the Interview
- * During the Interview
- * After the Interview

The following is meant to help you help us. Obviously, if you have to skip any of the steps, it is likely that someone else will have to do it for you.

We are grateful for any and all of our volunteers. Similarly, we are grateful to anyone who grants an interview. Gathering someone's oral history is a privilege. No matter the willingness and welcome of the interviewee, you the interviewer are still intruding into (usually) the person's home, in addition to his or her time and private memories. It is helpful to keep these facts in the back of your mind, especially if you have a tendency, for example, to talk about yourself. In sum: The interview is not a conversation. It is not about you.

Interview Check List: Before the Interview

1. Make contact with the interviewee by letter, phone, or e mail – whatever seems appropriate – to see if that person is willing to be interviewed for the MVHS.
2. Be certain the interviewee knows the basics:
 - the interview will probably be one visit only, of up to two hours. Modify plus or minus as you both wish.
 - the interview will be voice recorded. (Note: videotaping is fine, if you have the equipment to do so. We do not.)
 - the interviewee will not be paid for the interview
 - quiet is essential. Sure, the phone can ring, a neighbor can knock on the door, but do not schedule during, say, jackhammering of the patio.
 - the interviewee will have the opportunity to correct the transcript for such things as spelling errors.
3. Set a date.
4. Learn about your subject.
 - Consider giving/sending the person a Questionnaire to fill out and return to you before the interview. (These, in different forms, can be found on the top shelf of the oral history cupboard in the History Room of the MV Library.) Note: If the History Room is not open, you may have to find a librarian to open it for you.
 - Consider doing some friendly sleuthing: what did the person who recommend her/him have to say? Are there family members or neighbors or friends or colleagues or fellow whatevers to contact? Does anyone at a newspaper or civic entity (including the MV Library) have any record of this person? Has someone similar in age/neighborhood been interviewed before?

- Figure out subject matters that may jog a memory, such as what was happening in a general time period, what conflicts may have occurred within the community, or family, struggles of whatever type, and – my frequent favorite – a change of opinion about a person, or issue.

5. Learn about your equipment. Use it or lose it, so to speak. If you have your own equipment, fine. We, however, have new digital and tape recorders for your use. They, too, are stored in our History Room cupboard and may be checked out on a sign out sheet. Take the instructions with you. Make sure you have the requisite microphones (very helpful but not always necessary), and batteries, and tape cassettes for the tape recorders. Take more than you think you'll need. We have not set up an airtight system of checking out/returning equipment, so for now, please work logically – get the equipment a few days before the interview, and return it immediately afterward. If there's a piece you will need that is missing, call the person on the sign-out sheet who has it to make sure he/she plans to return it by a certain date.

Practice on yourself or someone who doesn't mind. Then practice again, and again, until you feel the equipment is an extension of your hand, and you know how to adjust audio levels.

* * Note: We prefer you use digital equipment, but cassettes are fine. * *

If you need batteries or cassettes, or other such material, please purchase them yourself and we will reimburse you, via the MVHS Treasurer, Rachel Riedy at [:info@millvalleyhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@millvalleyhistoricalsociety.org)

6. Also in the History Room cupboard is a variety of material about conducting interviews. You are welcome to borrow any of them. (See my own guidelines below.)

7. Call the interviewee the day before of the interview as a reminder.

8. Have a Release Form ready for the interviewee to sign. These are also in the History Room cupboard, or may be downloaded here:

9. As you leave for the interview, check that you have your equipment, questions, notepad, release form, and, if appropriate, small present of thanks.

* * Note: Throughout the pre-interview process and the post-interview process, please keep Kate Menzies (contact information below) advised of what's going on, especially when you have scheduled/completed an interview, so we know what's what, and do not duplicate any efforts. * *

Interview Check List: During the Interview

1. First, after thanking the interviewee, ask for help finding the best (quietest, most relaxing) interview spot, and quickly set up your recorder and mike.

2. Test your equipment quickly.

3. Ask your interviewee to state his or her name, the date, and place.

4. Basic interview.

The standard advice is to ask open-ended questions, ones you believe will solicit lengthy and/or introspective answers. If the general subject is the person's life in Mill Valley, start perhaps with childhood or teenage memories. If it's something else, start perhaps with the person's initial introduction to the subject.

If you notice something in the person's home, or perhaps something he/she is wearing that catches your eye, use that as a segue into a subject. Also, because the equipment is so mobile, consider carrying it with you to a part of the home where memories are literally stored: a table of photographs, an album collection, books, kitchen stuff, closet contents. Let's not get intrusive – but if someone mentions trying to feed the neighborhood during a flood/riot/depression/blackout, it might be helpful to take a look at the pot and ladle that were used.

Do not ever start with asking about what may be painful memories. The interviewee might bring up the subject early and surprise you, but this is not your decision. You need to build trust before difficult subjects can be broached.

Take notes while the person is talking, to remind yourself of something new you want to ask, or to verify spellings.

Do NOT talk about yourself. If the interviewee recalls Doctor Whoever coming around on house calls, do NOT mention he or she came by your house, too. If you feel compelled to tell your own story, please push the pause button, or stop the recording, then resume when you have finished.

If possible, limit your exclamations. “Oh, no!” “Holy Toledo!” “You don't say!” and the like just make more work for the transcriber, and can break the train of thought of the interviewee.

In sum: do not interrupt. This is NOT about you.

Exception: If the interviewee is going waaaaay off the subject (some people do like to hear themselves talk), after a gracious indulgence, tread lightly in with an “Excuse me,” and try to re-establish the thread. The artful interruption is an art form.

If you start asking about the past, with **then**, prepare to ask broad-based questions:

“What were the circumstances that brought you/your family to Mill Valley?”
(Here apply the standard journalistic 5 Ws: when, where (or from where), what, who, why.

Other “then”-type questions:

“What were your first impressions of the street/town/school/ geography/work ethic (or whatever) in MV?”

“Aspects of life here you liked/disliked/wanted to change?”

“Do you recall any local traditions/events/people of particular note?”

“Did you feel a `fit` with the town and its people, or not?”

“How did MV change over the years? For better? Worse?”

“Would you describe the highlights/challenges in your work/neighborhood/social life?”

“What were the circumstances of your name, and birth? Anything unusual?”

“Under what circumstances did you/family move to MV?”

“What made you decide to study/ move/ work at/ join?”

One rule to keep in mind is to think what you yourself might want to be asked about your own home town, if not MV, and your own early years.

If you start questions with **now**, other broad-based questions come under the general heading of what is the interviewee currently doing or thinking. That is too broad for strangers, though. I would break the overall subject down, appropriate to the person's age and/or occupation.

“What project (unless the person is clearly infirm) are you working on now?”
 “How have your interests changed over the years?”
 “What’s the extent of your community involvement (if any)?” (Some residents are localists and know nothing of Bolivia, say, while some are internationalists and know nothing of the Book Depot.)
 “What are your plans?/ What are you itching to do/see/hear?”
 “How have you dealt with setbacks?”
 “What would you like to see changed in MV/California/US/world?”
 “What are you reading?”
 “Do you have any regrets about your work?” (Asking about regrets in life is almost certainly too much for strangers.)
 "Has your opinion changed about _____ since ____?"
 "What would you do over, if anything, about _____?"
 "What in your life do you feel has been unappreciated, including by you?"

MOST IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER: DO NOT TALK ABOUT YOURSELF.
 This is NOT a conversation. LISTEN, AND ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS.

Unless you have clear indications to the contrary, make sounds about ending when you said you would end. Presumably, you can return. You can also ask if the interviewee would like to continue for, say, 15 more minutes, or not. Be aware of fatigue masquerading as politeness.

5. If photographs have been shown, and the interviewee is willing, borrow them to be scanned in the History Room, or see if the interviewee would be willing to come by and let the work be done. (It is up to you to clarify when this might take place, and to see the scanning through.)
6. Consider asking the interviewee for recommendations of other people to be interviewed.
7. Thank the interviewee, make sure the release is signed, and leave.

Note: Occasionally, no matter how much you have prepared, no matter how convivial and ear-ready you are, some interviews go nowhere, in part because the interviewee has never spoken much about a particular subject, and decides he/she doesn't really want to, or has never thought much about his/her experiences, or whatever. This happens.

Just let us know, and we'll move on from there.

Interview Check List: After the Interview

1. Call or write the interviewee with thanks.
2. Listen to the interview as soon as possible afterwards, and be on the lookout for any lacunae, contradictions, or confusions. Schedule a fill-in-the-blanks session if necessary.
3. Put the signed release form in the file folder on the History Room cupboard.
4. **WHAT TO DO WITH THE INTERVIEW ITSELF.**
 Let someone on the project know you have completed it. At this point, that would be either Alison Owings or Kate Menzies.
 If the interview is on cassette, here are options, in order of preference:

A. Mail it (with confirmation receipt) – and information about how to contact you -- to a transcriber. At this point, our preferred one is Sheri Prager, 1624 Mariner Drive, Sebastopol, 95472, phone 707 829-2543. Please check first she's available.

B. Label it and return it to the History Room cupboard, along with your contact information, or ask a librarian to put same in the MVHS box in the library.

If the interview was recorded digitally, please download it to your own computer and erase it from the recorder.

Then, until further notice, please copy the interview onto a CD. Please follow instructions about where to send it or put it.

5. Return any equipment.

6. Once the transcript is finished – please be in touch with Sheri about this, unless you have made other arrangements – make sure a copy of the transcript gets to the interviewee. This can be mailed by Sheri as hard copy, or e mailed if the interview can handle that. ALSO, be sure to return any borrowed and scanned photographs or other material.

7. Make sure the interviewee has received the transcript, and will be able to look it over for any errors within two weeks. We discourage the rewriting of history. This process is to fix any spelling or transcribing errors. Also, if the corrections are done by hand, please make sure they are clear for the transcriber to correct.

8. Please have Sheri Prager correct the errors, and send the corrected manuscript, by e mail, as well as the original cassette or CD to Cathy Blumberg, who will index it, have it printed, and file a paper copy in the History Room, and put the cassette or CD in the History Room cupboard.

9. Please contact one of us for a copy of the interview, to give the interviewee, as a thank you.

And, we thank you.

Miscellany: Transcripts of oral histories may be checked out of the MV library. Eventually, we hope to put the audio versions on the MV library website – one reason to use digital when recording.

Contacts: Kate Menzies 388- 4474 kmenzies@pacbell.net
Alison Owings 381-0239 ajowings@sbcglobal.net

OR: write to

oral-histories@millvalleyhistoricalsociety.org