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Hands-on: Avoiding Oral History Pitfalls

When researching your family tree, you might want to supplement the information gleaned from online or archive resources with personal accounts and reminiscences. Oral testimony can add depth, freshness and human details to stark dates and timelines, and can help you to get closer to your ancestors and how they lived. But there are a number of pitfalls that can catch out the unwary. Here are seven pitfalls in oral history research, and how to avoid them.

1. Going in unprepared

Your interviewee will do most of the talking, and your job is to handle the process. Having a plan of topics you want to ask about and a rough idea of how the questions might follow each other will help the conversation to flow more naturally and will put your interviewee at ease. Take in plenty of photographs of people and places to jog your interviewee's memory, plus old maps if you have them. Recordings of music, old radio shows or Churchill's speeches can be powerfully evocative.

Remember that you're talking to a person, not a memory machine, and if your research has shown that they've suffered loss and grief in their life, then be sensitive when asking about it. Think beforehand how you'll react if your interviewee gets upset. If you have to probe difficult topics, ask the interviewee if a family member or friend can sit in with them.

2. Asking your interviewee for factual details you can easily look up elsewhere

Don't waste valuable time asking questions like, "When did the Second World War start?" You want the human experience of the war, the textures and personal stories, so instead ask, "What do you remember about war being declared?" A simple question like, "Can you describe your journey to school?" will often evoke the names of shops, where people lived, even the number of the tram they took each day: information you won't get elsewhere.

3. Asking yes/no questions

Build up rapport by asking questions that encourage your interviewee to talk freely. "What do you remember about working in munitions?" allows them to tell their story their way. Nod and smile to encourage them to keep on talking and show that you're interested. If they run out of steam, pick up on the last phrase they used, for example, "The annual seaside outing? Tell me about that." If they go off track, gently bring them back by saying, "You started telling me about rationing?"

4. Having too narrow a research focus

Interviewees don't have to be related to the ancestor you're researching. Try neighbours, work mates, school fellows, people they did national service with, people who worked in the same industry or people who lived in the same area to give depth and colour to your research. Be open to new lines of enquiry such as hobbies, fashion, or trade union membership inspired by your interviewee's testimony.

5. Switching off the voice recorder too soon

Nuggets of information often appear on the doorstep when you're saying goodbye, so don't switch off the recorder until you're in the car. After being interviewed for an hour, many people find their memory then starts buzzing and it's not unusual for them to then sit and scribble down long forgotten details. A follow up interview is often a good idea to capture these newly awakened recollections. Doing several short interviews helps to build up rapport and trust between you and your interviewee, and is less tiring for both of you.

6. Overstaying your welcome

Build trust by keeping your word. Turn up on time, and if you've said the interview will last an hour, after fifty minutes, start getting ready to go. Elderly interviewees will get tired and might be embarrassed to ask you to leave. If there's more you want to cover, then arrange a follow-up interview, and agree which resources such as birth certificates or census returns you'll take along. It's kind and polite to write a friendly letter of thanks after an interview, enclosing printouts of any documents or photos you showed them, and a copy of the recorded interview. Interviewees often treasure these.

7. Not cross-referencing with other resources

Some of the information you collect will be irrelevant. People can only tell the story from their perspective, and they'll talk about what interests them most. Keep your body turned towards them and nod to show you're paying attention, even if the information isn't quite what you want.

Don't forget that memories can be unreliable: though we assume they're anchored by other events, often these anchors get muddled making a clear, yet erroneous, memory. Official documents, too, can contain mistakes (it's not uncommon for people to fib about their ages or occupations), so double-check information with other people and other documentary resources. Use a range of resources: oral histories from different people, online resources, museums and autobiographies to create a detailed and accurate picture of how your ancestors lived.

By avoiding the oral history pitfalls, you'll build up a treasure trove of social history, insights, experiences and nuanced stories that will help to bring your ancestors to life.