



WHRC Guidelines for Recording Oral History

INTRODUCTION

Oral history is a method of obtaining and preserving the spoken memories and perspectives of a person with firsthand knowledge of past events. Oral history provides current and past GFWC members with a historic voice and preserves GFWC history for future generations. Through oral history interviews, GFWC members share their experiences, enabling other members and researchers to better understand what it means to be a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

It is fairly easy to identify past and current GFWC members with stories to share. However, it is important to have the proper equipment, a set of questions, and established standards for conducting oral history interviews before you begin an oral history project. You should consult the WHRC chairman in your state federation and/or local club for advice and assistance to ensure that the interview process goes smoothly and that oral history recordings and transcripts are properly catalogued, stored, and shared. The GFWC WHRC chairman, committee, and staff also are available to help you plan your oral history project.

SELECTING EQUIPMENT

Oral histories may be recorded on audio or videotape, or through electronic recording devices. Be sure you have the appropriate technical expertise for handling the recording medium you choose. Since most clubs will likely use audiocassettes, the advice below relates to that type of recording. Please contact the WHRC if you would like advice or assistance in planning to record on videotape or with a digital device.

- A tape recorder should be durable, dependable, lightweight, portable, and simple to use. A cassette tape recorder with a separate microphone that plugs into the recording device is recommended for practicality. Also, a recorder that uses standard-size cassettes is preferable to one that uses micro- or mini-cassettes. If the person conducting the interview does not have a tape recorder and is purchasing or borrowing one, look for a recorder that produces reliable recordings with adequate sound. For example, some recording devices have the capability to dim or block out background noise. Recording devices may be available at a local public library.
- Most tape recorders can be plugged into a standard electrical outlet or operated with batteries. If the tape recorder uses batteries, make sure they have enough power to complete the entire interview. You might want to bring extra ones as a precaution.
- Cassette tapes should be of good quality and hold 60 to 90 minutes of recorded material. The 60 minute tapes are preferable, as they tend to be stronger than the 90 minute cassettes. Please save the plastic boxes for shipping and storage.
- A reliable microphone is vital to the interview process. A microphone that attaches to the subject's clothes and plugs into the recording device is preferable. However, a larger microphone that sits in a microphone stand in front of the interviewee will suffice. Make sure to test the microphone before arriving for the interview and again before the interview begins.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Good preparation for an oral history interview includes researching the interviewee's background. You may obtain this information during a preparatory meeting with the interviewee either via telephone or in person. Alternatively, you may provide the subject a set of questions that can be answered and returned prior to the oral history interview. Reviewing relevant historical time periods will facilitate preparing the interview questions and provide a better understanding of the interviewee's experiences. A good resource for a general overview of American history is the American Memory timeline on the Library of Congress website: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline>. For specific questions related to GFWC or state federation history, please contact the WHRC at WHRC@GFWC.org. An oral history background information form is on page 5.

CREATING THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Prior to the interview, prepare a list of questions that relate to joining and participating in GFWC, as well as more specific questions tailored to the interviewee's background. In addition, gather the interviewee's contemporary impressions and present-day retrospective. Ask **when, what, who**, and especially **why** and **how** questions. Avoid questions that require only simple yes or no answers. A list of sample questions is listed below.

Keep in mind that GFWC staff, members, and researchers will use GFWC oral histories to understand and interpret the history of GFWC and GFWC members. The following questions should be used as a starting point. Use knowledge about the interviewee, her era, and GFWC history, along with imagination and insight, to create questions that will encourage the interviewee to share her GFWC experiences and memories.

Sample Questions

- Brief personal background (i.e. birth date, family, childhood, etc.)
- How did you learn about GFWC?
- How and why did you become involved in your club? When and at what age?
- Describe some of the programs and activities you participated in during your time in GFWC. How did volunteering make you feel?
- Is there a program, project, issue, and/or service that was/is particularly important to you? Please explain why you feel this issue is so important and/or memorable.
- Do you believe your activities made an impact on the lives of others? In what ways do you feel they did or did not?
- How were/are you similar and/or different from your peers and other women in your club/community? Describe your relationship with them.
- What did your family think about your club and volunteer work?
- How did your life as a woman differ from the lives of men during your time in GFWC? Did GFWC affect your life as a woman?
- Did you do anything considered controversial for women? If so, describe your activities. What was your family's reaction?
- In addition to your volunteer work, were you employed outside of the home? If so, what was/is your job? How did your employer and co-workers view your GFWC membership?
- With what other organizations have you been involved? Describe your participation.

- What have you gotten/still get from your GFWC membership and club work?
- Are there any negatives to club membership? Is there anything about GFWC that you would change? If so, do you have any solutions?
- Do you feel GFWC has changed since you joined? In what ways?
- How would you assess your overall club experience?

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Preparing for an interview

- Make arrangements for an oral history interview by phone or in person. Inform the interviewee about the oral history process and explain the interview's purpose to preserve GFWC history and provide GFWC membership with a historical voice. Make sure to explain that the interview will last one to two hours.
- Choose an appointment time and location that is convenient for both parties. Keep in mind that environmental stimuli and background noise will affect both the quality of the recording and the interviewee's focus and comfort level. Conduct oral history interviews in a quiet room in a local library, community center, or home. Do not interview more than one person at a time.
- Take your prepared list of questions to the interview, along with a pad of paper and writing implements to make notes and record the spelling of names and places.

During the interview

- Arrive a few minutes early to prepare for the interview. Plug in the recording device and test the microphone to make sure it is picking up sound and recording properly.
- Once the interviewee arrives, chat for a few minutes before turning on the recorder. Explain that the interview will be a question and answer conversation, although the conversation will focus more on the interviewee in order to minimize interruptions. The interviewer should use physical indications, such as smiling, eye contact, and head-nodding to help keep the interviewee at ease. Demonstrate the recording device to avoid any confusion during the interview.
- At the beginning of the recording, state the following: interviewer's name, date, time, location, and purpose of the interview. Ask the interviewee to state her name and ask if she knows that the interview is being recorded.
- Begin the interview by asking questions from the question set. As the interview continues, the list of questions should be used as a guide, not quoted verbatim. Be sure to ask open-ended questions and phrase questions in ways that will evoke memories and conversation. Ask only one question at a time. Questions may arise during the interview in response to the interviewee's comments and stories. Write these questions down for follow-up at an appropriate time during the interview.
- Allow the interview to progress naturally. Try not to put words in the interviewee's mouth or lead the interview in too specific a direction. Try not to interrupt unless the interviewee begins to discuss information that does not relate to GFWC or the interviewee's personal experiences within GFWC. If the interviewee seems to be "misremembering" information, do not criticize; instead, try to encourage a fuller explanation of the topic.
- Be attentive; interviewing requires more concentration than ordinary conversation. Remember to be relaxed and keep the interviewee at ease.
- A typical interview lasts approximately an hour and a half; two hours should be the absolute maximum. If necessary, schedule a second interview.

Following the interview

- After the interview is complete, the interviewee and interviewer should sign a statement giving researchers permission to use the recordings. This agreement should also give ownership of the original tape(s), transcripts, and related materials to GFWC and/or state and local clubs. Sensitive information may be restricted for a designated period of time (e.g., 20 years or until death of interviewee), but this is not recommended. If the interviewee insists, stipulate the restrictions in the oral history deed of gift agreement (see page 6). GFWC will honor such restrictions.
- As soon as possible following the interview, label each cassette with the date, interviewee's and interviewer's names, and if applicable, tape number. Remove the small tabs on the top edge of the cassette tapes to prevent accidental erasure.
- Send a letter to the interviewee thanking her for her cooperation and for her contribution to GFWC and GFWC history.

TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription is a very important part of recording an oral history. Transcribing oral histories makes using and analyzing the recordings easier and more effective. A transcript identifies the major topics in an oral history interview and locates the exact or approximate points at which these topics occur in the recording. Transcripts help researchers determine whether the content of an oral history interview is relevant to their research. Transcripts also help to maintain the quality of recordings, as they allow researchers to scan tapes with minimal fast-forwarding and rewinding.

Transcribe a recording as soon as possible following an oral history interview, while the information is fresh in the interviewer's mind. Transcriptions are a written version of the audio recording and should be as close to verbatim as possible. Identify the interviewer and interviewee at the start of their comments by typing their name in bolded capital letters, followed by a colon (**SMITH:**). Occasionally, include the minute and second or the meter reading on the recorder to indicate key points during the interview and the general flow of the recording. Do not correct sentence structure, grammar, or usage. Omit filler expressions such as "um" or "ah," but include such expressions as "um-hum" or "uh-uh" when used to mean "yes" or "no" in response to specific questions. Indications of pauses or emotions should be included in the transcript. For example, if the interviewee laughs for an extended period of time, or pauses due to emotions or to consider an answer, include this information in parentheses: (pause) or (interviewee is moved to tears). Be sure to include fundamental information in a transcript, including the interviewer's name; interviewee's name, title (if applicable), and club; date; cassette tape number(s); and page number(s).

When the transcript is complete, contact the interviewee with any follow-up questions or spelling inquiries. You may wish to give a copy of the transcript to the interviewee for final review, but be sure to explain that the transcript must accurately reflect the recording. Be especially careful during the transcription process, as content and meaning can get lost as information is transferred from the recording to the transcript. The transcriber must remain impartial and sensitive to the interviewee's experiences and reflections.



ORAL HISTORY BACKGROUND INFORMATION FORM

This form, or a form with similar content, should be given to the interviewee prior to an oral history interview. The purpose of this form is to provide background information on which the interviewer can build a solid list of interview questions. Furthermore, this form will be preserved with any/all corresponding oral history materials and provide basic biographical information on the interviewee easily accessible to future researchers.

Interviewee Name _____

Address _____

Club Affiliation(s): List club name, city, and state; include dates of affiliation.

Awards/Honors: List any awards and/or honors received from national, state, or local GFWC clubs. Please include the date these awards and/or honors were received.

Additional Information: Please provide any additional information and/or significant events that should be noted in this basic biographical sketch.



DEED OF GIFT AGREEMENT

This is an agreement between the interviewer _____ and the interviewee _____, each of the undersigned person referred to herein as interviewee and interviewer.

In consideration of having the oral history information provided by interviewee, and including the audio and/or visual recordings and any/all corresponding transcripts containing such information, become part of the _____ (club name), and for other good and valuable consideration, the interviewee agrees to assign to the _____ (club name), all rights, title, and interest in such information and the audio and/or visual recordings and any/all corresponding transcripts and materials containing such information; provided, however, that nothing in this agreement shall prohibit the interviewee from using the information for his/her own noncommercial purposes.

It is distinctly understood by interviewee that it is the interviewee's purpose and intention to vest all the incidence of absolute ownership of the property, including any patents, copyrights or trademarks, in the _____ (club name), from this time forward.

Interviewee:

Interviewer:

Name

Name

Address

Address

Telephone Number

Telephone Number

Date

Date

Signature

Signature:

Received by (representative of the GFWC club, state federation, or GFWC-WHRC):

Name/Title _____ Date _____