

WRITING BAPTIST HISTORY: USING ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

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Preparation for writing a church history should include consideration of the use of oral history interviews as a source of facts and to get the mood, the attitudes of the people during that era. In one of the preceding articles, Dr. Lee N. Allen has reported some of his experiences in collecting material by means of personal recorded conversations with individuals who were present during the early years of their church's activities.

Dr. Allen mentioned the fact that oral history is a specialized field of research. The historian-writer does not approach this method of research in a haphazard manner. Advance preparation needs to be made, where possible. This preparation would include getting background information about the person to be interviewed and making notes on the topics to be covered. Of course, now and then the interviewer finds himself or herself in a situation where the tape recorder should be placed in service right then. That may happen when the interviewee is reminded of events or stories that are prefaced by the remark that "I had forgotten all about that. . ." or "I haven't thought of that in years."

If you are fortunate enough to have older members of your church still close at hand and mentally alert, I urge you to arrange an interview with them at a time when they feel like talking. Try to talk with one person at the time if you can do so, and set the interview at a time when you will be reasonably free of interruption.

When an interview was scheduled for my home, my advance preparation centered around three areas of "getting ready." First of all, I asked for the interview, explained the purpose, and suggested that the interviewee try to recall major events of the era we would be discussing. If that person had programs or other memorabilia of the time, he or she might bring them to the interview if not too bulky.

My own preparation included preparing a biographical data sheet on the interviewee and preparing legal release forms (simple but legally acceptable) to be signed by the person being interviewed. These forms give the church/or historian the right to quote information from the interview and make other use of the material as appropriate both in writing and promoting the book. I placed a "word list form" close at hand so I could verify spelling of proper names and places without diverting the attention of the interviewee from his or her story.

My preparation also included checking my tape recorder to be sure fresh batteries were in place, selecting a table or stand on which the recorder could rest that would be near enough to pick up the voice of the interviewee and yet enable me to watch the movement of the tape so I could turn to the other side when appropriate or replace that tape with a fresh one. The use of 90-minute tapes has been found to be most efficient. Use of an exterior microphone gets good results and suitable electrical outlets need to be investigated.

I try to record an introduction before the interviewee arrives, if possible, giving my name, address, the date, and the purpose of the proposed interview. By doing that, I find it easier to get my subject to relax. Where appropriate, I put on the coffeepot, or get a pitcher of lemonade or punch ready, set cups or glasses close and in easy reaching distance, in case the interviewee seems to be getting tired.

When my guest arrives, I make every effort to be sure she or he is comfortably seated and allow time for pleasantries if this is the first time the guest has been in my home. Within a few minutes, however, I usually say something like this: "Mrs. Brown, I'm grateful to you for taking time to help me with this effort to add to our other materials we have gathered together for our church history. Your contribution will be valuable, I feel sure, and I'd like to give you plenty of time to tell me about your experiences in the early days of the church. When did you move into the community?" Or ask, if you know already that she (or he) was born in that area, "Can you remember when you were first brought to the church? Did you come with your mother or did someone else bring you?"

Those perfectly natural questions or some equally simple should get your subject talking and remembering. As the conversation progresses, try not to interrupt unless there is a long pause. Often the person being interviewed will pause to catch her breath or just to think. Don't be afraid of a moment or two of silence. That could be better than breaking the train of thought by asking a question about a different matter.

When it appears that the subject under discussion has been covered, however, be prepared with other questions that will move the story along. Where possible, avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or no. Instead of asking "was that deacon a good leader?" you might ask "What did the other deacons do to support Mr. X?"

Start with non-controversial questions when you seek information about a church quarrel and save the delicate questions until you find out whether the interviewee is going to volunteer the information without your direct question. There may have been a church split that you need to know more about, but handle your questions carefully so as to avoid the appearance of encouraging gossip.

Information about the physical characteristics of pastors and church officials will add to the interest in a church history. Was the pastor tall or short? What was his age? Questions of that kind will lead the interviewee into mentioning other qualities that help "flesh out" the person being described.

You will want to keep your guest on the subject, but be flexible. He (or she) may be reminded of some incident or some person who played a major part in the church that you never heard of. Mention of that person and his actions may shed new light on some of the decisions made or actions taken. Listen carefully. If the interviewee offers to let you see family records or church records he has brought to the interview (or has nearby if you are doing the interview in his home), look at them carefully, take notes or ask to take them with you, if that seems desirable. Whatever you do, keep two things in mind: return anything borrowed such as a book or paper, and write down the date and place where you obtained your information. When you begin writing, you will need to be able to cite your sources in the history or in your records that serve as back-up. Don't be caught ready to write but not sure of your facts, and with a complete blank in your memory of where you got those facts. It is far better to record information that you do not use than to need that information and be unable to find where you obtained it originally.

One final caution: remember that the memories of any person, particularly of the elderly, are tricky. We all make mistakes about dates and places sometimes. If you are questioning some date given by the interviewee, you might tactfully ask "Was that the same year so-and-so was pastor?" or "How old were you when that happened?" That may bring a correction in date or a second look at what the person has told you. You may want to just check a date or event with written records or with someone with knowledge of that same event. If you do, avoid any comment that might give your interviewee or another source the idea that you do not believe them. You just want to confirm what you heard or recorded.

After the interview is concluded, the legal releases signed (where appropriate) the word list checked out, you may want to transcribe the interview so it will be easy to consult when you begin writing. If someone else is doing the transcription, look at the finished product carefully. Keep both tape and transcription close at hand until the history is completed, then place in a permanent file in your church library so others can consult that record for future histories.

Remember: Plan your interviews carefully; conduct them on tape but keep a notepad handy and verify spelling of names and places; do them at once. People die or lose their memories or move away. The firsthand knowledge gained from personal interviews will add spice and life to your book.

You may find that you fall in love with the possibilities of oral history interviews. If you want to learn more about that valuable tool of research, I am listing several books you will find helpful:

Leah Rawl Atkins, *A Manual for Writing Alabama State and Local History*, Chapter 7. (Montgomery: Alabama Historical Commission, 1976).

Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1971).

A number of books published in recent years were based on oral history interviews. A review of one or two of these books may prove helpful in developing the format you will use for your oral history interviews in the church history. Among these books are:

James S. Brown, ed., *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers' Project, 1938-1939*. (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982).

Studs Terkel, *"The Good War, " An Oral History of World War Two*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

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