

Conducting an Oral History

Oral histories are a great way to record the thoughts and experiences of people from all walks of life who have experienced historical events. You and your group will be recording several oral histories that capture both contemporary and historical moviegoing experiences, and the materials in this packet will help you along the way.

Checklist:

1. Background Reflection and Consideration – Class:

- Consider and reflect on your modern day moviegoing and movie viewing experience.
- Consider and hypothesize about the moviegoing experiences in the early 1900s

2. Background Research Moviegoing in the early 1900s – Individual / Class:

- Review the background material, photos and news clippings found in the **Going to the Show** collection associated with the Bijou Theatre (pronounced bye-joe) in Wilmington, North Carolina in the early 1900s.

3. Introduction to Oral Histories – Individual / Class

- Explore motivation, utility and value of oral histories.
- Listen to examples of oral histories / Read oral history transcripts that include references to historical moviegoing experiences:

- The speakers are George and Tessie Dyer who worked in Charlotte textile mills for much of their lives. In this interview they share some of their recreational activities, including going to the movies: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0161/> . (search for **movie**)
 - The speaker is Murphy Yomen Sigmon who entered the workforce at the age of fourteen and held a variety of jobs in North Carolina industries before a mill shutdown ended his long working life. In an excerpt from the interview, he shares his experience about going to the movies in Hickory, North Carolina: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0142/> . (search for **moving picture**)
excerpt: Moviegoing in Hickory, North Carolina: http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0142/excerpts/excerpt_5342.html
 - The speaker is Margaret Skinner who was born in Ireland, but in this interview she discusses her experiences working at the company store of a cotton mill in Cooleemee, North Carolina. She remembers some of the daily routines and what they did for fun including watching movies: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0278/>. (search for **movie**)
 - The speaker is Ethelene McCabe Allen who was born to tenant farmers and spent most of her childhood moving around Wayne County and Johnston County, North Carolina. In this interview she recalls her childhood during the 1930s and 1940s including their leisure activities: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0316/> . (search for **movie**)
 - The speaker is Viola Turner, born February 17, 1900, the only child of her African American teenage parents. The latter portion of this interview focuses on her descriptions of entertainment and race relations. Specifically, Turner describes her interaction with various black performers and her experiences attending both black and white theaters in Durham. In addition, she explains her friendship with Eula Perry – who could easily “pass” for white – and the reactions their friendship elicited from various observers.: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0015/menu.html> . (search for **theatre**)
- Consider the following discussion questions:
 - How often did people go to the movies?
 - How did people get to the movies?
 - Where was the movie theater located? (downtown? in a building shared with other businesses)

- What kind of movies did they see?
- How do the oral histories relate to the photos and news clippings referenced above?
- How much did it cost to see a movie?
- What was the impact of segregation?

4. Practicing conducting an Oral History – Contemporary Moviegoing – Group

- Form into groups of 3
- Write 5-7 questions to illicit information about a person's contemporary moviegoing experience for your oral history. You might want to focus on:
 - their first memory of seeing a movie: where did they see it (home or theater)? what did they see? how long was the movie? how much did it cost? what did they eat? how long was the movie? who did they see the movie with?
 - their first memory of going to a theater to see a movie: where the movie theater was located (urban mall, downtown)? how far did they have to travel? what did they see? how much did it cost? what did they eat?; who did they go with? How many movies (screens) were in the theater?
 - their most recent movie viewing experience: where did they watch the movie (e.g. home or theater)? how much did it cost? what did they see?, etc.;
 - their most recent movie-going experience where they went to a theater to see a movie: why did they decide to go to a theater?, how much did it cost? how far did they go? what did they see? what time was the movie?, etc.
- Choose someone to conduct the interview (interviewer), someone to be interviewed (interviewee), and someone to record / transcribe and take notes. The recorder will document who participated in each of the roles.
 - Conduct the first interview.
 - Swap roles. The recorder will document who participated in each of the roles.
 - Conduct the second interview.
 - Swap roles. The recorder will document who participated in each of the roles.
 - Conduct the third interview
 - If the oral histories were tape recorded, label the tape(s) with interviewer and interviewee names, and the date of the interview.
 - If the oral histories were tape recorded, transcribe the interviews.
- You can find examples of transcriptions from the sample oral history web pages provided above.
- If the oral histories were recorded by hand, the interviewer should revisit the notes transcribed for his/her interview, edit and clean up to prepare a formal transcription.
- Interviewer, write reflections regarding the interviewees responses, comments, and/or experiences.
- Turn in your tapes, transcripts and individual reflections.

5. Conducting an Oral History – Historical Moviegoing - Individual

- Identify 3 people to interview and submit to teacher.
- If necessary, have interview subjects sign the release form (in this packet) and submit to teacher.
- Schedule the three interviews, set up a time and place with your interviewees to record the oral history, and submit to teacher. Plan for approximately 45 minutes per interview (15 minutes set up and introductions, 30 minutes for the interview)
- Practice using the tape recording equipment, making sure you're very familiar with how it works.
- Prepare 5-10 questions to illicit information about the interviewee's historical moviegoing experience for your oral history. Consider the historical background material you read. Consider your findings regarding contemporary moviegoing experiences. Since you're trying to get an historical perspective here, you might want to focus on:

- their first memory of going to a theater to see a movie: where the movie theater was located (urban mall, downtown)? how far did they have to travel? what did they see? how much did it cost? what did they eat?; who did they go with? How many movies (screens) were in the theater?
- Conduct the oral history, asking the questions you have prepared, and following the “Interviewing Guidelines.” If possible, audio record the interview. Additionally, jot down notes during the interview. You don’t need to record every word, but jot down main ideas or stories in the order the speaker says them, maybe in outline form.
- Collect the tape(s) after your oral history, label them with interviewee’s name and date of the interview, and store them in a safe place.
- Write and send a thank you note to each of your interviewees.
- If you audio-recorded your interview, prepare a textual transcription. Annotate your interview transcription with any additional notes, comments, observations, embellishments, etc. Write a brief summary of the interviewee’s background (where he or she is from, his/her age at time of moviegoing experience, timeframe (year) of his/her moviegoing experience, location (city, state) of his/her moviegoing experience, and the general topics covered in the interview.
You can find examples of transcriptions from the sample oral history web pages provided above.

6. Reflecting on oral histories: comparing / contrasting moviegoing experiences then and now – Individual

- Listen to each of your oral histories: 1 or 2 classmates, 3 historical interviewees
As you listen to each of the oral histories, take notes on key characteristics of each interviewee’s moviegoing experience, and information or stories that especially caught your interest.
Consider the following questions while you’re listening to the recording or reading your interview notes:
 - How did the interviewee in your oral history seem to feel about going to the movies? Did he/she remember it enthusiastically? fondly? sentimentally? no emotion?
 - How did going to the movies impact the interviewee’s life? Was it merely entertainment? Was it an escape? Was it a form of courtship? Was it a means of keeping up on current events and news?
 - Was moviegoing a regular part of the interviewee’s life, or was it a special event? What were the influencing factors that swayed it in one direction or the other?
 - What did you learn by recording this oral history? What was most interesting? What was most surprising? What was most humorous? What was most touching?
- Identify the 3 most interesting aspects of all of the interviews, copy the transcription from the interview that covered each of them, and write a brief paragraph on why each is so interesting.
- Prepare a summary that identifies the key similarities in the moviegoing experience between the contemporary and historical interviewees.
- Prepare a summary that identifies the key differences in the moviegoing experience between the contemporary and historical interviewees.

7. Present findings - Individual

- Present your summary to the rest of the class.

Question Guidelines:

- Ask open-ended questions; these will get much longer and more interesting answers than “yes or no” questions.
- Create an outline of the questions you’d like to ask, but remember to be flexible. You can add in questions you think of during the interview, and leave out prepared questions if they don’t fit into the conversation.
- Practice asking follow-up questions or statements to get interviewees to elaborate. Some examples are, “Could you tell me more about that?” or “Is there anything else you remember about that time?”
- Don’t ask leading questions that indicate how you expect the interviewee to answer or that sway their opinions. For example, you wouldn’t ask, “Don’t you think mall-oriented megaplexes are the best / worst thing to happen to the moviegoing experience?”, but instead something like how did you feel about going downtown to see a movie?”
- It’s often good to end the interview by asking if there’s anything else on the topic the speaker would like to add. This leaves an opening for any stories or opinions the speaker wasn’t able to address while answering your prepared questions.

Interviewing Guidelines:

- Bring extra batteries and blank tapes to the interview.
- Arrive on time, and test to make sure all your equipment is running correctly before you begin the interview.
- At the beginning of the tape, read this introduction:
 - This is [your name] interviewing [interviewee's full name] on [today's date, including year] on the subject of their experiences about going to the movies. This interview is taking place in [town and state] and is part of [your teacher's name] at [your school's name] oral history project exploring contemporary and historical moviegoing experiences.
- Make sure not to interrupt the speaker, and let him or her have time to think of answers. You may have to sit in silence for a few seconds, but that’s okay; this will give the speaker time to fully collect his or her thoughts.
- **Practice listening!** Concentrate on what the speaker is saying, instead of jumping ahead in your mind to what you’re going to ask next.
- Although it should be at least 20-30 minutes, the interview probably shouldn’t last more than 45 minutes to an hour because both you and the interviewee will get tired.

Transcribing Guidelines:

- Make sure to label the tapes with the date, name of the interviewer and interviewee, location, the name of your project and school. If you have more than one tape, label them in order (e.g. 1 of 4)
- As you transcribe, record the speaker’s words as closely as you can. Don’t correct the speaker’s grammar or word choice.
- You can make notes about sounds that may have interrupted the interview, such as phones or doorbells ringing.
- It will take a while to transcribe the interview, so you may want to listen through or review the notes you took, and only transcribe the most interesting sections (based on your teacher’s instruction)

Moviegoing Oral History Sample Questions:

Do you recall ...

- What year you saw your first movie?
- Where did you go to see a movie? (e.g. theater building, drive-in theater, today: maybe to a friend's house)
- Where was the movie theater located? (e.g. downtown – dedicated building, suburb – dedicated building, mall – megaplex)
- Why did you go to the movies?
- Who did you go see the movie with?
- What mode of transportation did you use to get to the movie theater?
- How far did you travel?
- How long did it take to get to the movie theater?
- How much did the movie ticket cost?
- How many movies could you see for one movie ticket?
- What did you eat and/or drink? How much did the food cost?
- What was played before the movie? (e.g. trailers, news clips, cartoons, shorts)
- What movie did you see?
- Was the movie silent or talkie, black&white or color
- What was most memorable about the movie? (the actors, the story, the cinematography, the scenery, the music, special effects, lots of screaming children in the audience)
- How long did the movie last?
- Do you remember if there was a rating on the movie and what it was?
- Was there live music?
- Can you describe the building the theater was in?
- Did it house just one movie theater or multiple theaters/screens?
- Can you describe the interior of the theater (e.g. how many seats?, was it cramped/roomy? was there a balcony? was the floor sloped? was there a stage and screen, or just a screen? was it clean/messy? do you recall the rest room facilities)
- Was there any sort of segregation? (e.g. white-only theater, black-only theater, theater allowed both but with separate seating)
- How often did you go to see the movies?

Release Form

Name of Project: _____

I understand that this oral history will be recorded and used by the students and teachers of

School's Name: _____

for the purpose of preserving the experience and history of going to the movies. The oral history will be

held in the school's library. I give my permission for this use.

Interviewee's Name (print): _____

Interviewee's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Witness (print): _____

Witness (sign): _____

Conditions (e.g. prefer that transcripts are never published online and/or in print, oral history to
be used only by students in this class and not the entire school, etc.)
