

Introduction to Doing Oral History

Time

1 class period

Overview

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce, explore, and examine oral history as a means to record and formalize history's oral tradition and as a way to capture the experiences of those who lived through a historical event or period. Oral tradition far predates the written histories upon which we have come to rely for our understanding of the past. Oral histories—or the writing down of the stories told by witnesses to an event or period in the past—provide an important source for historians as they analyze and interpret the past. Like any source, oral histories have strengths and weaknesses that must be considered in their use as primary resources.

Objectives

- Students will understand the strengths and weaknesses of oral history as a primary source of historical information.
- Students will be exposed to an oral history in written and/or audio form.

Essential Question

- How does preparing for, conducting, and processing oral histories contribute to the interviewer's understanding of history, specifically the World War II experiences of Japanese Americans incarcerated at Amache, Colorado?

Guiding Question(s)

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of oral histories as primary sources?

Colorado Model Content Standards (2008)

- History 2: Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry.

- History 2.2: Students know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information.

Materials

- Cliff Kuhn and Marjorie L. McLellan, "Oral History," *OAH Magazine of History* (spring 1997): 3–5. PDF copies can be found at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/oralhistory/kuhn-mcclellan.pdf> (accessed August 4, 2009) or by visiting <http://www.oah.org/> (accessed August 4, 2009) and highlighting "Magazine of History" from the menu on the left-hand side of the page.
- Examples of oral histories from Denshō: The Japanese American Legacy Project can be found online at <http://www.densho.org/> (accessed August 4, 2009.) Choose "Archive" from the menu at the top of the home page, then "enter the archive." The Amache-related resources are found in several places within the archive. Of particular interest to this unit are six oral history interviews. These interviews have been divided into smaller segments and transcribed. To view them, use the search function to locate the following interviewees:
 - Bob Fuchigami
 - Mary Hamano
 - Mutsu Homma
 - Joe Ishikawa
 - Irene Najima
 - Susumu Yenokida
- *Amache Reunion Interviews* from the Denver Public Library [C940.5317 A4793 VIDEO CASSETTE] and/or *The Amache Project*, also from the Denver Public Library [C940.5317 A479 VIDEO CASSETTE]

Background

An overview of the Japanese American experience in Colorado is available as part of the introductory materials accompanying this unit.

Opening

- Ask students to turn and talk with nearby students about a historical event each experienced.
 - What are the commonalities in terms of memory?
 - What are the differences in the students' accounts?
- Discuss with students the notion that they are a part of history on a daily basis. Include in the discussion the idea that history is much broader and more encompassing than just the actions and events related to "notable" people.
- Ask student volunteers to recount a story from their own family backgrounds. Upon completion of each story, consider the following questions:
 - How was the story learned?
 - How is the validity of the story viewed by family members?
- Suggest to students the idea that the perspective of the viewer or participant in a historical event colors the way in which it is understood and reported.

Activities

- Introduce students to a variety of oral history accounts. Resources for this type of material abound, including those noted in the "Materials" section above. If at all possible, provide students with not only written accounts, but recordings of interviews as well. Consider the questions raised earlier when analyzing the validity, reliability, and perspective of students' personal stories.
- Ask students to evaluate the legitimacy of oral history accounts as "history."
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of oral accounts?
 - What is the value of oral history in understanding the past?
 - How might we "validate" an interviewee's account of a particular event or circumstance?
 - What sources might be used to "factualize" an oral history interview?

Closing

- Ask students to complete an exit card responding to the following prompts:
 - What questions would you have for the individuals whose oral histories you have encountered today?
 - What caution would you give to someone using an oral history as a primary resource?

Extension

- Students can ask family members to relate family stories.
- Students can use the aforementioned Web sites to find and read additional oral histories.

References

- Association of Personal Historians, Inc. (APH, Inc.). <http://www.personalhistorians.org/> (accessed July 24, 2009).
- Oral History Association (OHA). <http://www.oralhistory.org/> (accessed July 24, 2009).

