



## Oral History 101

There are many ways to search for your family history. An option that offers a fuller context that records alone is an oral history interview. For example there is the documentary of a small town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan called Winona: A Copper Mining Ghost Town. The interviewer, Michael Loukinen, was able to interview several people about their life in the area and gain a greater insight into the town. Sadly, many of the interviewees passed shortly after the documentary, but without this documentary their stories might not have been preserved. Another example is Archives.org, which interviews their staff to record the "work practices, decision-making processes, historical actions, and events." These interviews can be found [here](#).

Here are a few steps you can take to make the oral history interview a success:

- Decide before the interview what your main focus will be. Is it an event, a time period or a full life story? This will help you keep the interview fairly structured.
- Ask open-ended questions so they can expand their answers beyond a yes and a no.
- There might be pauses while the interviewee is trying to recollect a memory. Please allow for those silences, because this will give them the best chance to tell their full story.
- Ask them to bring photographs to the session or bring photos you have found in your search. This may help jog their memory.
- Before the start of each recording, mention briefly who you are, who they are, the date, the location, and any more information that may be relevant. This will help you keep organized and not lose the context of the recording.
- Transcribe the recording because technology doesn't last forever. This will give you an opportunity to quickly look back at a particular section instead of trying to find it in an audio/video recording.



## Resources:

FamilySearch: [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Creating\\_Oral\\_Histories](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Creating_Oral_Histories)

Library of Congress's The American Folklife Center:  
<https://loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>

Oral History Association: <https://www.oralhistory.org/>

PBS's History Detectives:  
<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/technique/oral-history/>

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