

# The value of oral history

**Why use oral history with your students? Oral history has benefits that no other historical source provides.**

**BY KATHRYN WALBERT**

Historians and history teachers have a wide range of primary sources upon which to draw when we approach the past. Newspapers, census data, diaries, letters, photographs, memoirs, and other documents all surely have their place in both the historian's research and the classroom. But oral history has several unique benefits that no other historical source provides.

**Oral history allows you to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical record.** While historians and history students can use traditional documents to reconstruct the past, everyday people fall through the cracks in the written record. Politicians, activists, and business leaders may show up regularly in official documents and the media, but the rest of us very seldom do. Chances are, if someone had to reconstruct your life story from the written record alone, they would have very little to go on --- and the information they would be able to gather would reveal very little about the heart and soul of your daily life, or the things that matter most to you.

**Oral history allows you to compensate for the digital age.** Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can rely on extensive correspondence and regular diary entries for information about life in the past. But in today's world, telephone, email, and web-based communication have largely replaced those valuable written records. Without oral history, much of the personal history of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries would be lost to future historians.

**Oral history allows you to learn different kinds of information.** Even when we do have extensive written sources about someone --- such as a politician -- we may not have the kind of information we want. Newspaper articles, speeches, and government documents may reveal significant useful information, but those kinds of sources often neglect more personal and private experiences. Through oral history, you can learn about the hopes, feelings, aspirations, disappointments, family histories, and personal experiences of the people you interview.

**Oral history allows you to ask the questions you're interested in.** If you are a historian studying Frederick Douglass and you have a burning question about his life, the best that you can do is to hope that, through a creative reading of the existing sources, you'll find the

answer somewhere in his papers and other contemporary documents. But by talking to people in your community about the past, you can ask what you want to ask and create the source materials that will help you answer your questions.

**Oral history provides historical actors with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words.** Through oral history, interviewees have a chance to participate in the creation of the historical retelling of their lives. Unlike Frederick Douglass who is long dead and cannot complicate, extend, or argue with our understanding of his life, living historical actors can enrich our understanding of history by telling their version of events and their interpretations in their own words.

**Oral history provides a rich opportunity for human interaction.** History, after all, is all about the human experience. Through oral history, researchers and interviewees come together in conversation about a commonly shared interest—as with all human interactions, this has the potential to be tremendously rewarding for both parties.