

# NEBRASKA MEMORIES

*Making Nebraska's past unforgettable*



[www.memories.ne.gov](http://www.memories.ne.gov)

## Nebraska and the Great Depression: Oral History Interview Project & Preservation of Photographic Treasures

### Purpose

The oral history interview that you will be conducting is going to serve as a vivid link from the immediate present to the not so distant past in a very understandable and human way. The project is an attempt for you to preserve a small segment of a relatively recent historical period as viewed through the eyes, experiences, and memories of person/persons who lived during that time.

### GRADE LEVEL:

8-12

### SUBJECT:

**Social Studies**

### Time needed to Complete the Lesson

At least one class period to explain the process. It may take about two months to complete this project. Students need to contact a person (preferably a family member) to interview. This is, at times, difficult to accomplish so the teacher, with assistance from parents/guardians, may wish to contact residents at an elder village (retirement home). This option has, in the past, proven to be very successful. Residents are typically very pleased to share their life stories with young people.

### Desired Results

Nebraska Social Studies STAR Standards

8.4.2 Students will demonstrate skills for historical analysis.

8.4.6 Students will improve their skills in historical research and geographical analysis.

12.1.13 Students will develop skills for historical analysis.

12.2.11 Students will demonstrate historical research and geographical skills.

Nebraska State Social Studies Standards:

12.1.7 By the end of twelfth grade, students will analyze and explain the Great Depression.

12.1.13 By the end of twelfth grade, students will develop skills for historical analysis.



## **Student Learnings:**

There are a number of learnings that will result from the interview you engage in:

- reinforce knowledge of the historical content discussed in class
- extend knowledge beyond what is read in your texts
- uncover ways in which events reshaped communities and individuals
- develop research tools
- improve writing skills
- develop valuable critical thinking skills
- improve questioning skills
- develop organizational skills
- a better understanding of the past by making personal connections through first-hand accounts
- improve valuable inter-personal skills
- develop an understanding that history is something that happens all the time, not just something that happened to important dead people a long time ago
- develop skills to preserve photographs

## **Objectives:**

After completing the interview, it is hoped that students will be better able to:

- define social history and formulate questions that might be asked by social historians
- interpret social histories
- use oral history and oral history techniques to gather information about social history of her/his community
- compare information from oral histories reflecting different eras to gain insight into changes in social life in the United States in the 20th century

## **Planning:**

Decide what you hope to accomplish and identify the resources you will need to achieve that goal. Since you are ultimately responsible for the entire project, it follows that you have adequate historical background information for the time period we are studying prior to your interview. Good content knowledge will enhance your questioning skills and provide a better understanding of the person you are interviewing.

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For background on Oral History Interviewing, see the Nebraska State Historical Society's "Capturing the Living Past: An Oral History Primer":

[http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral\\_history](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral_history)

See the Nebraska Library Commission's Nebraska Memories Website, for an example of a cover sheet for an Oral History Report written in 1941 by a researcher for the Works Progress Administration's Nebraska Federal Writers' Project<sup>1</sup>. This folklore interview took place in Fullerton, Nebraska.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.memories.ne.gov/u?/hr,57>

You can also go to the Library of Congress Website to read examples of oral history interviews that were done during the Great Depression<sup>2</sup>. Based on the oral histories you read from the Federal Writers' Project, develop general statements about changes in the lives of everyday Americans and plan to share these in class.

<sup>2</sup> <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

The point is that you should go into the interview well prepared. This includes a set of questions that have been reviewed by you and some classmates prior to the interview. This will help you learn that some questions simply do not ask what was intended. Remember that the questions should be open-ended and not ones that will merely elicit a "yes" or "no" response. An interview is not a dialogue. The whole point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell her/his story. Limit your own remarks to a few introductions/opening statements to get things started, and then begin your questions.

Make sure the person you are going to interview knows the topics you are going to ask but do not share your specific questions in advance. This may result in rehearsed, rather than spontaneous answers to your questions. You may, however, enlist the help of the interviewee to develop an outline that will begin with the early life in the family and proceed chronologically through the era we are studying. You can also request relevant artifacts such as photographs, letters, scrapbooks, etc., to aid in your preparation.

Also, be sure to provide the person with a release form in case you choose to archive or publish any part of the interview. The interviewee must be fully informed about the purpose of the project and the



expected use of the material. The release form should include a section for any restrictions that the interviewee wants to place on the use of the material.

The interview can be conducted over several days but each session should not last more than two hours. The location should also be one where you will be free from any distracting noises.

If you also choose to videotape the interview, make sure you obtain prior consent (a week should do) from the interviewee. Place the camera at an angle from the interviewee rather than directly in front of her/him. Once in place and started, let it roll without interference. Don't zoom in or out or get up to change angles. There should also be a release form signed before videotaping the interview. Some people may wish to place restraints on its use.

Ask the interviewee to compile photographs that help to illustrate their oral history. Before the interview, go to the Saving your Treasures Website<sup>3</sup> and under "Sneak Peeks" click on the link for "How To Care For Your Photos". Prepare a list of suggestions for your interviewee on how to preserve their photographic treasures.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.netnebraska.org/extras/treasures/index.htm>

For a class project, all the students will go to the Nebraska Library Commission's Nebraska Memories Website<sup>4</sup> to find photographs similar to the ones that were shared during the interviews.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nebraskamemories.org>

At the Website, click on Browse, then click on Topic. Clicking on the Portrait section, the Sports section, or the Education section will display a number of Nebraska photographs, which can be matched to the era of the interviewee's photos.

Another strategy to find comparable photographs is to Click on Search, and enter the word "photograph" or the word "negative" followed by the year to retrieve images from the year that matches the photographs of the interviewee.



## Questions:

Remember that an oral history interview is composed of one part questions, one part what the interviewee remembers, and one part unanticipated revelations. You should allow digressions as rambling is sometimes more productive than problematic. You need to decide when you ought to gently pull her/him back to the subject.

## Tips and Techniques

- Start the interview with easy, non-controversial, brief, and open-ended questions requiring detailed answers so that the interviewee will be encouraged to relax and talk freely. By doing this you may establish a pattern of in-depth responses and remembrances. The person will, most likely, overcome the natural anxiety and nervousness once she/he has had a chance to talk about something she/he knows well. This may provide you with highly significant information or a subject that you never thought of pursuing. When a pause is reached, you might want to tell the person that her/his recollections have brought up a number of topics that you would like to know more about. Take your time. Don't hurry.
- Listen carefully. Indicate that you have done some reading and research but that the interviewee has special information that you value. Rely on your curiosity and common sense to ask follow-up questions.
- Leading questions may interfere with the remembering process by creating a "constructed memory." Instead, ask something like, "What was your reaction as you went through that experience?" Here you are asking for her/him to remember their thinking at the time, not a current perception of the topic.
- Keep your own thoughts and experiences out of the interview. Resist the temptation to show off your knowledge. It is the interviewee's story not your view that is important. This is not a dialogue.
- Silence is O.K. It may represent more thinking or an emotional response. It may help to keep the interview at a natural pace. Use their photographs as a catalyst to resume the conversation.
- Reserve sensitive questions for the opportune time and ask them respectfully. Don't evade difficult questions but wait for the "right" moment.
- Don't interrupt because you have a question, but let the person go on and jot down your questions to help you remember to ask them later.
- Try to establish at every important point in the story, where the person was or what her/his role was, in order to indicate how much is eye-witness information and how much is second-



hand knowledge or accounts of others.

- If there are accounts you think may be inaccurate, tactfully point out that there is a different account of what she/he described and say, “I have heard...” or “I have read...” This is not a challenge but rather an opportunity for her/him to explain or to temper what was said.
- Close the interview politely, perhaps completing the interview with some discussion of the present. Send the person a letter of thanks and a copy of the interview if they want one.

## **Debriefing (to be done in class):**

The following questions can be asked to your students after the interviews are concluded and turned in.

- Based on the interviews and the oral histories you read from the Federal Writers’ Project, are there any general observations about how the lives of people changed?
- Are there areas of life that changed very little? Why do you think this is true?
- What was the most surprising piece of information that your interview generated? Why was it surprising?
- What questions were most successful in generating relevant responses? Least effective?
- Was it hard to keep the person on topic? What strategies worked to pull the person back to the focus of the interview?
- What good follow-up questions were asked?
- What would you have done to make the interview more productive?

## **Major Topics for Interview and Sample Questions:**

### Family History

- What is your full name?
- What can you tell me about your family farther back than your grandparents?
- What is your ethnic origin and how has it affected your life?

### Early Childhood Memories

- I would like for you to think back to the earliest thing you can remember... how old were you and what was going on?
- What else do you remember about the time before you went to school?



## Elementary School Memories

- What incident in elementary school stands out... what was it?
- What are some other vivid memories of grade school?
- What kinds of things did you do during the summer?

## High School Memories

- What subjects and/or teachers did you particularly enjoy?
- What social group did you belong to during high school and are you still in contact with any of them?
- How would you sum up your childhood and adolescence?

## Higher Education

- Did you attend any college or vocational school after high school? If so, what can you tell me about that experience?
- How did you do?
- Tell me about a vivid incident that occurred while you were there.

## Military Service

- Did you serve in the armed forces?
- What was it like?

## Adult Life

- Under what circumstances did you leave home?
- Where have you lived during your adult life?

## Career

- What was your first job after leaving home?
- What about your career have you found to be the most satisfying?

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## Marriage

- How did you meet?
- What was your courtship like?

## Children

- What was the experience like for you when your first child was born?
- What is the best thing about having children? The most frustrating?

## Impact of major historical events

- What impact did the Great Depression have on you and your family?
- What impact did World War II have on you?



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<http://www.netnebraska.org/extras/treasures>