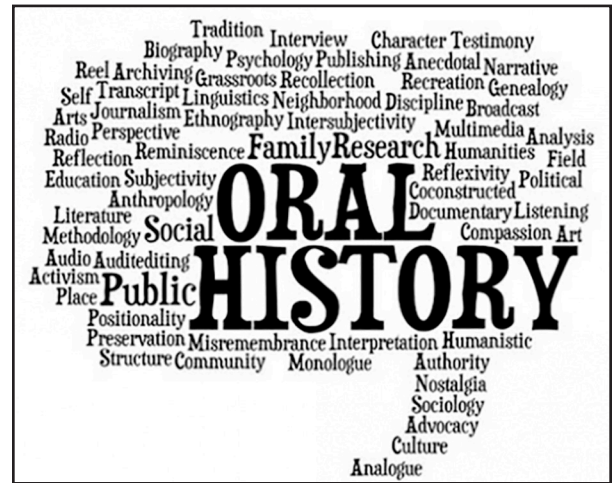


RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Home Is Where Your History Starts

by Adrianus Boudewyn - 2006

Ever done oral history? Interviewing parents or grandparents, uncles, aunts? It's a lot of work, but very satisfying if you have the interest. Anyone with the capacity to listen and write down observations can do oral histories. My brother and I did my parents', then presented a completely bound binder for their 50th anniversary. We also made binders for our siblings. But even the best intentions of how to set up your project can have a few twists. For instance, we decided to ask both parents information about major events in their lives, their growing up years, their romantic years, work, the war years (they're from Europe), information about various moves, etc. Well, writing out answers to questions posed long distance was a non-starter. Instead they decided to commit to



recording their thoughts on a tape recorder within the segments we wanted addressed. And they also agreed to answer some of the questions by themselves, instead of collaborating on answers. And what would have turned out as a very stiff abbreviated account if they had written it out long hand, turned into 12 hours of conversation. (vitality, etc.). We transcribed that and then posed follow-up questions, for clarification.

What was satisfying was to hear their voices on tape as they described incidents in their lives, what they emphasized, my Dad rhapsodizing about a redhead he had met when he was 18, etc. At some future meeting we hope to have an instructor talk about the how of conducting a satisfying oral history. There is plenty about it on the internet, a little less in libraries.

In the meantime, here are some general tips from the experts: Before the interview, have an outline of the topics you want to cover and the questions to get there. You'll want to know where the person lived, occupation, genealogy, what their parents did, events they were involved in and shaped their lives, what they did for entertainment and where, people that influenced them, moments they're most proud of, disappointments, outside interests, etc.

To get all that you need to be a good listener and, except for nudging the conversation along, talk as little as possible. When you get dates, verify and repeat them to make sure they're accurate. Think about your questions and how you'll phrase them. If you ask for a birth date, that might be all you get. But if you ask what the world was like when the person being interviewed was born, you'll get an earful and possible leads to the rest of their story.

Open-ended questions are preferred, so design them to get a range of answers. Be relaxed and friendly and be prepared to spend the extra time to get a good, full, complete story. Interviewing with a tape recorder can be tricky, because some people get nervous. So relax them and make sure the equipment works because any fidgeting will distract the interview subject. As for the proper time, pick a target date. Perhaps a birthday, an anniversary, a luncheon date, anything that is a little festive and loosens the tongue of the subject for a good story. You'll be amazed how much you didn't know!