

Harvesting the River Lesson Plan: Taking an Oral History

Objective: students will be able to record and write up an oral history from a family or community member after hearing and/or reading examples of oral histories in the Audio and Video Archives of *the Harvesting the River* Web exhibit and following the guidelines listed below.

Grades: 5th and above

Time Required: several hours; includes time to 1) identify the interviewee, 2) research the topics to be covered, 3) compose the questions, 4) schedule and conduct the interview, and 5) write the narrative from the tape or notes.

Online Resources: *Harvesting the River* Online Audio Archives
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/audio>



Materials:

Interviewing guidelines

Tape recorder and tape

Paper and pen for taking notes

Composition paper or computer with

Word-processing program, printer

Motivation: The people in our families and communities are rich resources of information about the past. They are living witnesses to history. Often this information is lost because no one records and organizes it. To preserve this history and to learn about history first-hand, we can interview systematically people in our community or family about the events at particular time periods in their lives. A person does not have to be famous or to have lived through exciting events to be an important source of history.

Procedure:

Guidelines to the Oral Interview:

Part One: Select the Interviewee

- Decide what period of history (the lifetime of a living person) the project will cover — childhood, early adulthood, a certain decade, a period in the history of a town, etc.
- List several people that would fit into the identified era.
- Narrow the choice to one or two.
- Contact the chosen person and ask him or her to sign a permission form to interview him on tape for the specified project, explaining what the interview is for and how it will be used.

Part Two: Pre-interview Research

- Get as much information about the topic and the person as you can (from family members, library sources on the community), in order to become familiar with the general timeline of events during the specified time period or place.
- Prepare a general list of specific questions and topics that you would like to cover in the interview. Use open-ended questions more than Yes/No questions to avoid getting very short answers. (The interviewee, in the course of the interview, may also introduce new topics that you will want to pursue, so this is not a rigid script of questions).

Part Three: Practice:

- Practice using your equipment so the technology during the interview will go smoothly.
- Practice an interview with a friend, family member, or classmate as a trial run. The interviewer should do less talking than the person being interviewed.
- Pack pens and paper in case technology fails.

Part Four: Conducting the Interview

- Select a quiet place to use for the interview (no TV, radios, barking dogs, etc.)
- Put the interviewee at ease because people are often nervous about being taped; they are afraid their memory may fail or that they will be boring.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Do not interrupt the interviewee. (If there is a memory lapse, you can provide a suggestion or reassure him/her that you can fill in the information later.)
- If the interviewee strays from the question, bring him/her back with a comment or question.
- If the interviewee gets tired or fidgety, you can close the interview and reschedule more time later if needed.

Part Five: Processing the Information

- For a written report, the interviewer will want to take written notes or make a verbatim transcript of the audiotape. (This depends on the age and skills of the interviewer.) The interviewer can then compose a report about the events and people on the tape in his/her own words.
- For a digital audio history, the interviewer can digitize the oral interview by connecting the tape player to the computer and using the appropriate software. This digitized version can be edited into short files, each on a topic, such as those in *Harvesting the River*.

By sharing each interview with others, a larger picture of the time and place in question emerges — a history of the town, of a family, of a generation, of a decade, etc.

Assessment:

- The interviewer will choose and interview one person who is pertinent to the topic covered.
- The interviewer produces written information obtained from family or public sources.
- The interview produces a list of possible questions and topics to be covered that are pertinent to the assignment.
- The interviewer returns with an audible tape of the interview, and/or notes taken during the interview.
- The interviewer produces written notes or a digitized tape.
- The interviewer produces a written historical documentary narrative based on the interview that contains correct statements and information.
- The interviewer shares the report with the class.
- The class members share interviews with one another to create a larger understanding of the history lesson.

Illinois State Board of Education Standards and Goals Addressed:**History: Social Systems:**

Late Elementary: 18.B.2a: Describe interactions of individuals, groups and institutions in situations drawn from the local community (e.g., local response to state and national reforms).

Middle School: 18.B.3a: Analyze how individuals and groups interact with and within institutions (e.g., educational, military).

Late High School: 18.B.: Use methods of social science inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support conclusions with evidence, report findings) to study the development and functions of social systems and report conclusions to a larger audience.

History:

Late Elementary: 16.A.2c: Ask questions and seek answers by collecting and analyzing data from historic documents, images and other literary and non-literary sources.

Late High School: 16.A.5a: Analyze historical and contemporary developments using methods of historical inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support inferences with evidence, report findings).

E: Understand Illinois, United States and world environmental history. (Choose various grade levels of this goal, according to the subject matter being studied).