Remote Oral History
Physically Distanced. *socially connected*.

Mark Cutler, Lawrence History Center

(Note: this document will be revised and updated as we gain experience with the process. Please return periodically for information.)

What is oral history?

Oral history is the documentation of one's personal perspective in the greater context of a local, regional, national, or global story. Studying oral history testimonies, humans can gain insight into past events that "public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials,"[1] alone, cannot reveal. Thus, oral history is a complement to traditional historical documentation, as it is a primary-source account of an event or events as one person lived them, and it can augment what other primary and secondary sources tell us about a time period. Oral history is a democratic process in that it gives equal importance to all people, whether they live in the public eye or are lesser known. As such, oral history affirms that every voice matters.

What is remote oral history?

Remote oral history achieves the same effect as traditional oral history, even if circumstances make in-person interaction impossible or inadvisable, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic that has people around the world sequestered in their homes and physically distancing themselves from the rest of society. There are many ways to execute an oral history interview remotely, including web-based conferencing applications[2] like Zoom and Skype, tools that allow for podcast-quality recording of video and/or audio. Both Zoom and Skype allow for video interviewing as well as call-in access via a phone number. The recordings that these types of services capture can be saved on a local disk or cloud-based server and imported into editing software for trimming, composing, and curating archival-quality oral histories. Remote oral history allows people to make personal, human connections when they most need them and helps to highlight the lives of community members in a way that reflects the current reality.

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[1] https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/66420.pdf
[2] https://uwm.edu/libraries/resources/oral-histories-at-a-distance/

What are limitations of remote oral history?

Remote oral history, at first, may seem impersonal and superficial. As highlighted above, however, during times of physical distancing, this process may bring people closer together. Therefore, it is important for both the interviewer and the interviewee/narrator to recognize the limitations of remote oral history and accept them as part of the adventure of documenting history in real time, across distance. Limitations may include audio and video delays, overlapping audio feeds, poor recording conditions, choppy video, "tinny" audio, and dropped calls due to narrow bandwidth or poor cellular signal, to name a few. You and the interviewee/narrator can mitigate these issues by following these recommendations, for starters:

- Ensure ahead of time that your technology works correctly and that you know how to use it. Solve any issues well in advance.
- Be on time for your call and even early if you are collaborating with a team that also is working remotely. This will allow you time to settle into the virtual space.
- Get rid of background distractions. Try clearing the space behind you, blurring the background (Skype), or using a green screen or virtual background (Zoom).
- Use earbuds or headphones with a microphone to isolate yourself acoustically in the virtual space.
- If possible, situate yourself in a quiet place, free from background noise and echoes, such as a bedroom, a closet, or a car, where sounds are absorbed by soft materials.
- The sounds your microphone picks up may interfere with the story being recorded. To avoid this, mute yourself when you are not speaking and remember to unmute yourself only to follow up on something the interviewee/narrator has said. You also can use Zoom's advanced audio settings to suppress background sounds.
- Speak clearly and loudly and look into the camera when talking.
- Frame yourself in the camera centrally and visibly. Use balanced, controlled lighting to illuminate yourself fully from the front and reduce shadows and backlighting.
- When recording the interview, enlarge the interviewee's/narrator's picture and reduce or hide your own. The emphasis should be on the person telling their story—not you.
- Pay attention to the interviewee/narrator and give them your respect visibly and audibly.
- Mind your devices. Close all applications and turn off notifications that may make noise and/or distract you and the interviewee/narrator during the interview.
- Allow sufficient time for audio to transmit so that you and the interviewee/narrator do not interrupt one another.

How does one go about capturing oral histories remotely?

This is just one way to capture oral history remotely—if you would like to recommend another step or procedure, entirely, please feel free to be in touch with the author.

Step 1: The invitation

Decide on your theme and write an invitation that you can send out to the community via social networks and online social media. For instance, in Lawrence, MA, we will focus on communities coming together in times of crisis, and we will send out the invitation through the Lawrence History Center's social media accounts via a link to our website. We also will encourage our friends in the non-profit community, supporters and volunteers of the Lawrence History Center, local schools, and personal contacts to share it around their circles.

In order to move on to the next step, we will require community members to read and sign an agreement to give all rights of ownership of their oral history to the Lawrence History Center. It will read like this:

Upon signing and submitting this form, I hereby give and deliver to the Lawrence History Center/Immigrant City Archives of Lawrence, MA, all the incidents of ownership of the interview (audio, video, photos/screenshots, or submitted in writing/online form), including copyright, from this time forward (Per Terms and Conditions).

We are using JotForm, a free on-line platform, to obtain the required information, including hand signatures:

1) Their name,
2) Their date of birth,
3) Their physical mailing address,
4) Their e-mail address, and
5) Their phone number.

This will help to follow up with people later and will aid in setting up our archival index.

Once community members have signed this agreement, or adults have signed on behalf of their minor wards, they may proceed to the next step.

Step 2: The pitch

Invite the community to tell a brief version or a snippet of their story in a recorded format, such as via a Google Voice voicemail message. Record a voicemail greeting with brief instructions. Google Voice records messages of up to three minutes in length, though you may suggest that your callers speak for just two minutes to be sure they do not run out of time. You can use this process to screen stories for your project as well as to compile stories reflecting diverse voices.

You can save the recordings as .mp3 files in a Google Drive folder or on your computer. To do this, from your Google Voice inbox, as shown in Figure 1, select the message you wish to save; hover your cursor over the three vertical dots to the right (1) to reveal "More options"; click on "Download," and select the destination for your file. Google Voice automatically generates a transcription of the message (2), which is useful as a base for your official transcription of the oral history (though not entirely perfect, especially with languages other than English).
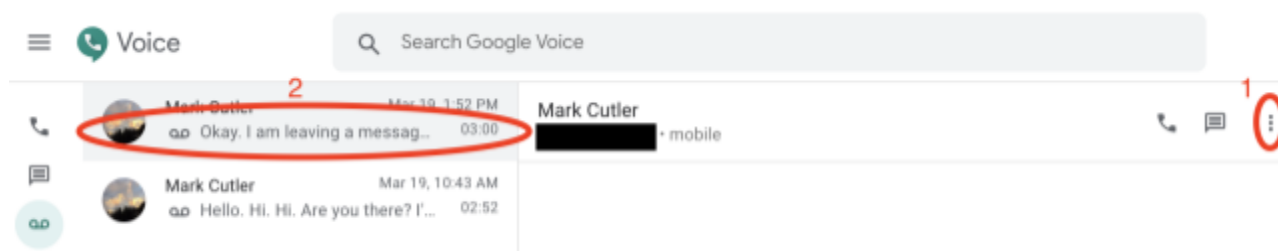

Figure 1

When you invite people to call your Google Voice number, you may tell them, and reiterate through your outgoing voicemail greeting to clearly enunciate their full name and phone number at the start of their message. Google Voice should capture the phone number from which people call.

Step 3: Setting up the interview

Once you have identified community members that you would like to interview, you can invite them to share their story with you in a full-length interview over Zoom. Zoom generates an invitation to meetings that you can share with people so they can patch in via the Zoom app, the Zoom web client (without the app), or a unique phone number. Work with the interviewee/narrator to determine which of these approaches will work best and initiate the call. Interviewing teams should arrive at the meeting a few minutes early to set it up and stay a few minutes after the meeting to debrief the interview.

Step 4: Recording the interview

The process for recording the interview is simple. You should follow your own oral history protocols and, when you are ready to begin, press the "Record" button at the bottom-middle of your Zoom window. You will see "Recording" in red at the top of your screen when this feature is active. You may want to "pin" the video of your interviewee/narrator so that they remain the primary focus of the video, or you may want to vary between "speaker view" and "gallery view," depending on your intentions. When setting up the recording, you can choose whether to save your recording locally (on your computer) or in the cloud. Conveniently, Zoom records meetings in different audio-only and audio/video formats for use with a variety of applications.

Now what?

Now that you have collected your interview, you are ready to prepare it for archival. Edit and produce the video for curation on YouTube and/or OHMS using your favorite video editing application. Here are lists of free and paid audio and video editing tools that work for novices and pros, alike. You may wish to capture a transcription of your video, which is useful for research and proper archiving. One easy way to capture a transcription is with YouTube: Once you upload your video to the free video sharing service, you can follow these instructions. You likely will find that the transcription is not perfect and that you have to edit it some, or quite extensively. Fluency in the language of the interview is helpful for editing.   See this talk on oral history in multilingual communities from the 2018 Massachusetts History Conference for examples of YouTube transcriptions of various accents and languages. If you intend to add subtitles and/or captions, you may find it useful to work with one of these 10 free subtitle maker tools. A few years ago, we decided to add both translated subtitles *and* captions to our videos for greater accessibility.

What about permissions?

It is important that the interview process be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, engagement, and open discussion among all parties, from the first encounter between interviewer and interviewee/narrator to the creation of end products. For this reason, we have included our Oral History Agreement Form in the invitation (see Step 1: The invitation, above).

This Agreement is captured using a secured form on the JotForm online form builder. Regarding the security of the information collected, we did consider using encrypted forms, but because we are not collecting sensitive/confidential information such as credit card numbers, Social Security numbers, etc., we felt that this level of security was sufficient.

From [JotForm](#):

> *When you get the embed codes of your secure form, it will use the HTTPS protocol. This means that there's a strong encryption that creates a tunnel between our servers and the people filling out your forms. As they submit the form, the form is also submitted over this same HTTPS (secure) protocol, so with just that, your forms are safe.*

Participants must also agree to the following Terms and Conditions prior to participation. The opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions is afforded once the interview has been completed and prior to a final submission of the Deed of Gift.

<u>Terms and Conditions</u>

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with the Lawrence History Center Remote Oral History Project: Physically Distanced. Socially Connected. You are being asked to participate because you reside in the city of Lawrence, MA or have otherwise been chosen due to your deep ties to the city. You will be asked about your personal story about your experience with the Lawrence community coming together in times of crisis during the current COVID-19 outbreak as well as other times when you and your community persevered in the face of adversity (e.g., the 2018 Merrimack Valley gas explosions, etc.).

2. The interview will be audio/video recorded, transcribed, and made available for public and scholarly use at Lawrence History Center. Any member of the general public will have access to this interview and your words may be quoted in scholarly and popular publications.

3. The interview will take approximately 15-60 minutes. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions after the interview has been conducted. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any recording made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview. With your permission, a photograph [or screenshot] of you may be taken. If you withdraw from the project, all copies of the photograph(s) will be given to you. Any image will be destroyed.

4. Subject to the provisions of paragraph five below, upon completion of the interview, the recording and content of the interview belong to the Lawrence History Center, and the information in the interview can be used by the Lawrence History Center in any manner it will determine, including, but not limited to, future use by researchers in presentations and publications.

5. The Lawrence History Center agrees that:

A.   It will not use or exercise any of its rights to the information in the interview prior to the signing of a Deed of Gift.

B.   The Deed of Gift will be submitted to you for your signature after the interview.

C.   Restrictions on the use of the interview can be placed in the Deed of Gift by you and will be accepted as amending the Lawrence History Center's rights to the content of the interview.

6. Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be handled by editing those portions out of the final copy of the transcript.

7. Upon signing the Deed of Gift, the recordings, photograph(s), and the transcript will be kept in the Lawrence History Center.

8. If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact Amita Kiley, Collections Manager, Lawrence History Center, 6 Essex Street, Lawrence, MA 01840, 978-686-9230, amita@lawrencehistory.org, website www.lawrencehistory.org.

Got any additional resources?

Sure! Here's a Google Drive [folder](#) with a number of readings, guides, and other useful resources for conducting oral history in your community. In addition to the Lawrence History Center's archives, here's where many of our recent oral histories are curated for public access: https://nosotroselpueblolawrence.org.

*ADDED on August 17: I found this webinar called [Oral History at a Distance: Conducting Remote Interviews](#) from the Oral History Association. This goes into great depth on not only the protocols for remote oral history, but also model practices, technology, and legal considerations for oral history in general. (I wish these resources had been around when I started writing the Primer!)

*ADDED on September 17: From the OHA—[even more resources](#), including this "Decision Tree" (flow chart): [Considerations for Remote Oral History Interviewing](#).