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Defining Oral History: Working Definitions

“The systematic collection of peoples’ testimonies about their own experiences.”
– Judith Moyer, *Step-by-Step Guide to Doing Oral History*

“The interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction.” – Ronald J. Grele, *Oral History: An Interpretive Anthology*

“Oral history is a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. It is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s.” – Oral History Association

“Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange.”
-- Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History, A Practical Guide*

“Oral history is a history built around people. . . . It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. . . . It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others . . . it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings.” – Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*

“Oral history might be understood as a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record. Oral history is, at its heart, a dialogue.” – Linda Shopes, *What is Oral History?*