



Oral History Guidelines for Interviewers

Preserving our heritage through the voices of our people

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) recognizes the rich history and heritage of the Service and the many contributions of employees and others to the mission of the Service. The Service has an oral history program to acknowledge and record these stories.

Goal of the Oral History Project

To preserve the heritage and culture of the FWS through the voices of its employees.

How it Works

Oral History Interview Candidates.

We want to talk to anyone who played a role in our history. Interviewees include former Directors and Regional Directors, project leaders, biologists, clerical and support staff, maintenance people, personnel representing every aspect of our agency. We also welcome oral histories with people who worked closely with us, such as contract pilots, former caretakers of FWS-managed lands, members of conservation organizations, and so on.

Nomination Process.

Service employees and retirees nominate candidates for oral histories. To nominate a candidate, contact your Regional Heritage Committee member (See the Oral History webpage for a list of members at <https://training.fws.gov/history/HeritageCommittee.html>). Circumstances vary; ideally the Regional Heritage Committee representative, or a designated interviewer, contacts the potential nominee to seek their willingness to participate in an interview. Once the candidate agrees to an interview, the Regional Heritage Committee representative informs the Oral History Coordinator, including the name and contact information of the nominator and nominee, interview priority (e.g., if the nominee is elderly and ill), and the nominee's most recent program, duty station, and Region.

Key Steps.

Oral history interviewers are current or retired Service employees or FWS volunteers. Interviewers arrange an interview time and place with the interviewee, and record the interviewees' stories with audio or video recorders.

Interviewers send the recording to the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in West Virginia to be transcribed. The Service shares the transcriptions online, and otherwise stores copies in the Service's archives to ensure they remain accessible. NCTC and D.C. Booth Fish Hatchery, South Dakota, house the recordings.

To access transcriptions available to date, visit the Oral History web page at <https://training.fws.gov/history/OralHistories.html>.

Interviewer Preparation

Successful oral histories occur when the interviewer and interviewee (subject or narrator) are well prepared.

- Volunteer to conduct oral history interviews by contacting your Regional Heritage Committee representative to connect to the Oral History Coordinator, who manages interview prioritization and tracks completed interviews.
- Prepare to conduct interviews by understanding the goal of the FWS Oral History Project and being able to explain the project succinctly. In addition to these guidelines, view the webinar on the Oral History

web page at <https://training.fws.gov/topic/online-training/webinars/oral-history.html>, and if possible, shadow an experienced interviewer.

- When you are ready to begin, contact the Oral History Coordinator to receive/confirm the name, the requested background information, and contact information of the person you will interview.
- Research the interviewee and their career. Learning about the interviewee will help you ask intelligent and relevant questions.
- Obtain a good quality and reliable MP3 digital voice recorder. Contact the Oral History Coordinator who may be able to provide you with your Regional recorder (usually a Sony ICD-PX440 – see the Quick Start user guide at https://docs.sony.com/release/ICDPX440_qsg.pdf). You are responsible for FedExing the recorder back to the Oral History Coordinator (or the next interviewer if instructed) upon completion of the interview process.
- Some interviewers also video record interviews.
- Familiarize yourself with the recording equipment. Practice recording, pausing, restarting, and saving the MP3 digital file successfully to your computer before the interview.
- Become familiar with the **Oral History Interview Question Guide** (posted on the Oral History web page at <https://nctc.fws.gov/history/oralhistories.html>) and note questions or topics relevant for the interviewee. Make every effort to arrange the interview in chronological order.
- If you are planning a group interview, plan for each person to introduce themselves and to moderate so only one person speaks at a time. It's helpful to video record group interviews to make it easier for the transcriptionist to assign speakers with text. Successful group video recordings have a moderator and another person running the camera.

For the interview, have on hand:

- Interview questions—including any you determined are especially relevant for the interview.
- Digital recorder—and video recorder if also using one—and extra batteries.
- **Gift and Release Agreement** form (available on the Oral History web page at <https://training.fws.gov/history/OralHistories.html>) to be signed by both parties.
- **Oral History Interviewer Notes** document—to record the correct spelling of names and places the interviewer mentions.
- Name tags, if video recording a group interview.
- Water for both parties.

Interviewee Preparation

- Contact the interviewee via phone or email to arrange an introductory meeting to get acquainted. See and modify, as appropriate, **Sample Oral History Interview Planning Communications** on the Oral History web page at <https://nctc.fws.gov/history/oralhistories.html>. You can also attach and/or direct them to this site to view the **Oral History Project Guide for Interviewees**.
- Consider sharing the **Oral History Interview Questions Guide** (on the Oral History web page at <https://training.fws.gov/history/OralHistories.html>) and indicate any topics about which you especially wish to inquire. They should understand that the interviewer is a guide, and that the interview will be a monologue rather than a dialogue.
- Let them know that while the interview is casual, the wording in the transcript that will be posted online will reflect the actual wording in the interview and cannot be changed. Ums, ahs, and other filler words or “false starts” will be deleted from the transcript. This is to aid readability and not to change meaning or make it sound like they are always speaking in complete sentences. Anything controversial for a federal site will also be removed.
- Ask the interviewee to think about how they would like to present information. They may wish to create an outline or make their own notes prior to the interview. They may want to prepare certain information,

such as their start and retirement dates, or look up names and spellings. Let them know it is best for the interviews to move in chronological order.

- Ask if the interviewee would like to show and share any photos, letters, maps, or other items. If so, ask them to bring these to the interview.
- Let the interviewee know you will ask them to sign the **Gift and Agreement Release Agreement** form. And, if they are willing, you would like to take their photo, and therefore, will ask them to sign the **Agreement for Use of Likeness in Audio/Visual Products General Release**, also posted on the Oral History web page.
- Ask if they have any questions.
- Set the interview date, time, and location. Limit interviews to 90 minutes. The location must be a quiet place free of distractions and noises. Suggestions include their home, your home, a local FWS field station, or other convenient, and quiet, location.

During the Interview

- At the beginning of the interview, state your name, the interviewer's name, and the location.
- You and the interviewee sign the **Gift and Release Agreement** form. If the interviewee indicates they would like a copy of the final transcript, include that in the email when sending the MP3 file.
- Minimize distracting noises. Avoid air conditioners, heaters, fans, TVs, radios, and other appliances that make background noise. Suggest disconnecting the phone and turning off cell phones. Remove pets from the area, if in a home. Any noise will be amplified on the recording.
- Set up the equipment unobtrusively to help put the interviewee, and yourself, at ease.
- If you are using an external microphone, set it on a stand or away from table-top noise (papers rustling, fingers or pencils tapping, etc.). Do not handle the microphone while it is on.
- A good interview is more monologue than dialogue. Be attentive, courteous, and responsive, but remain largely silent.
- Although you are letting the interviewee do most of the speaking, your role is to keep the topic flow on track, keep it professional (no personal attacks), and chronological.
- Allow the interviewee time to think or collect thoughts. If there is an obvious break, ask a question from the list, or clarify points from the notes taken earlier in the interview.
- Be sure to use the "Pause" (not "Stop") button if taking a break to avoid creating multiple digital files.
- Keep track of the time so as not to tire the interviewee. 90 minutes is a long interview. If the interviewee has more to say, schedule another interview.
- Hit "Stop" when the interview is completed.
- Review notes to ensure you have key information, such as their start and retirement dates, and correct spellings for name and places noted, and otherwise complete the questions in the **Gift and Release Agreement** form.
- Ask the interviewee if you may take a photo, in which case, also ask them to sign the **Agreement for Use of Likeness in Audio/Visual Products General Release** form.
- Ask if the interviewee would like to see the transcript before it is published. Let them know that it may be awhile before their transcript is ready to review. Keep in mind that the transcript will be posted without delay once reviewed and approved.
- For video group interviews, have a moderator and someone else running the camera. The moderator asks each person to introduce themselves, and to repeat their name each time they speak. The moderator ensures only one person speaks at a time, and the camera person should zoom in on the speaker if someone talks for several minutes.

Final Steps

- Keep the digital recorder in a cool, clean, dry place until you download the MP3 file.
- Review the **Gift and Release Agreement** form, at <https://training.fws.gov/history/OralHistories.html>, once more to ensure it is complete, and review your notes, to ensure accurate spellings.
- Within one week of the interview, email the MP3 file, a scanned copy of the **Gift and Release Agreement** form, along notes indicating correct spellings of proper names, and a digital photo and accompanying photo “likeness” release form, to history@fws.gov or, if necessary, mail it to:
Historian, Heritage Branch
National Conservation Training Center
698 Conservation Way
Shepherdstown, WV 25443
- Review the transcript while listening to the recording to ensure information is correct.
- Send corrections if needed, though remember actual wording cannot be changed.
- Email the Oral History Coordinator so they can update the national tracking database.
- If the interviewee requested the final transcript, mail them a copy. Once the final transcript is posted online, you may delete the interview from the recorder, either before or after FedExing it to the Oral History Coordinator or their designee.

This guide comes to you from NCTC’s Heritage Branch and the [Heritage Committee](#), comprised of FWS employees and FWS Retiree Association members serving on the Oral History Subcommittee.

Questions? Contact Mark Madison, FWS Historian, at history@fws.gov.

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