

# Collecting the Stories of Our Lives: Tips for Recording Oral Histories and Life Stories

## A Part of the “Wednesdays with Witcher” Series

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### Extremely Important Work

- Lose a library when a person passes...
- Putting it off could mean forever...
- So very many ways of recording oral histories & life stories...
- Resist the urge to let perfection get in the way of progress...

### A Continuum of Approaches

- Academic approach
  - Weeks/months researching interviewee's life
  - Rigorous compilation of the right questions
  - Formulaic approach to asking questions and verifying responses
- Conversational approach
  - Discover some interesting touchstones in the person's life
  - Compile circa half a dozen questions in advance
  - Listen with the expectation to be amazed

### Let's Have a Conversation—Celeste Headlee's “Advice for Communicating, Listening, and Interviewing”

- Pay attention—be in that moment
- Don't pontificate
- Use open ended questions
- Don't equate your experience with hers/his—it's never the same...and it's not about you
- Try not to repeat yourself
- Stay out of the weeds—most people don't care about the details...they will provide you with details that interest them
- LISTEN...Listen to understand, not to reply
- Be brief
- ...Again, it's not about you

### Questions to Ask

- Pictures
- StoryCorps Questions—<https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>
- Family Tree Magazine—<https://familytreemagazine.com/storytelling/interviewing/interview-questions/>
- Your interests...

### Recording Devices to Use

- So many choices—find the one that works for you
  - Easy

- Invisible
- Rolland Digital Recorder
- OM System WS883 Digital Recorder
- Olympus WS-852 Digital Recorder
- Your own personal smart device
  - Video is already on devices—but don't let it be an inhibitor.
  - iPhone—Voice Memos App
  - Android—Recorder App
  - Other...

### **Where to Have the Conversation**

- Where the interviewee is most comfortable
- Where temperature and light can be easily adjusted
- Where one can bring memory triggers, most especially food
- Where the potential for unwanted distractions is minimal
- Comfortable seating with ability to easily use a recording device

### **Follow-up**

- Thank-you communication
- Review the recording for clarity and completeness
- Back-up on a number of storage devices
- Share
- Consider transcribing
- Share again

**Have Conversations of a Lifetime!**