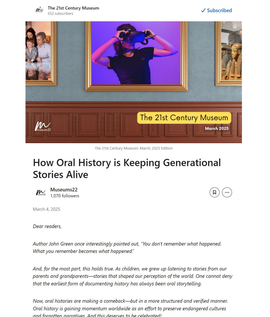

The 21st Century Museum's March, 2025 Edition

How Oral History is Keeping Generational Stories Alive

Museums22
1,070 followers

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Dear readers,

Author John Green once interestingly pointed out, "You don't remember what happened. What you remember becomes what happened."

And, for the most part, this holds true. As children, we grew up listening to stories from our parents and grandparents—stories that shaped our perception of the world. One cannot deny that the earliest form of documenting history has always been oral storytelling.

Now, oral histories are making a comeback—but in a more structured and verified manner. Oral history is gaining momentum worldwide as an effort to preserve endangered cultures and forgotten narratives. And this deserves to be celebrated!

In this month's edition, we have tried to capture the spirit of oral histories with a quick guide of how each and every one of us can help document our local stories. I hope you'll love reading this as much as we enjoyed writing this.

Regards,

Shalini Bansal

Co-founder, Museums22

The Importance of Oral History

"If everything has a history, that means that whatever we don't like about the world we live in can be changed—and we have the power to change it." says Dan Royles, an associate professor of history at Binghamton University, Royles specializes in African American life and culture, as well as LGBTQ+ identity and community.

From 2017 to 2019, Royles digitized Virginia Key Beach Park Trust archives, preserving Miami's segregated beach history

While conducting research for his first book, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS*, he encountered the concept of oral histories.

In his words:

> *"I wouldn't have been able to write without the oral histories. As I was conducting those early interviews, people would sometimes say, 'Oh, I have this binder of materials. Do you want to take a look at it?' And that's what I started to digitize—with permission. That became the basis for the digital collections project."*

This is why, now more than ever, historians and researchers are reaching out to communities to document their experiences and stories—ensuring that voices often left out of traditional historical records are preserved for future generations.

Steps to Document Oral History

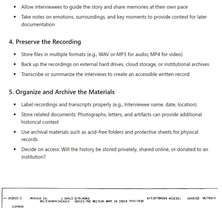
We've studied the University of Nevada, Las Vegas' approach to their Special Collections & Archives workshop and identified these key steps for effectively documenting oral histories:

1. Identify the Purpose and Scope

- Determine why you are collecting oral histories (e.g., preserving family history, community stories, research)
- **Define the scope:** What themes, time periods, or events will be covered?
- Identify potential interviewees who have lived experiences relevant to the project

2. Prepare for Interviews

- **Research background information:** Learn about the people, places, and events related to the interviewee's story
- **Create a list of questions:** Keep them open-ended to encourage detailed responses (e.g., "Can you describe a typical day working in the fields?")
- **Obtain permissions:** Inform interviewees about how their stories will be used and get their consent (written or recorded)



The Ortiz family labeled and donated many photos, which Sarah Quigley from

3. Conduct the Interview

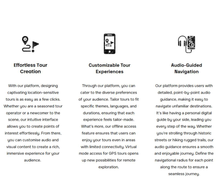
- Choose a quiet and comfortable setting to avoid distractions
- Use quality recording equipment (digital audio/video recorders or high-quality smartphone apps)
- **Follow a conversational style:** Start with easy, personal questions before diving into deeper topics
- Allow interviewees to guide the story and share memories at their own pace
- Take notes on emotions, surroundings, and key moments to provide context for later documentation

4. Preserve the Recording

- Store files in multiple formats (e.g., WAV or MP3 for audio; MP4 for video)
- Back up the recordings on external hard drives, cloud storage, or institutional archives
- Transcribe or summarize the interviews to create an accessible written record

5. Organize and Archive the Materials

- Label recordings and transcripts properly (e.g., Interviewee name, date, location)
- Store related documents: Photographs, letters, and artifacts can provide additional historical context
- Use archival materials such as acid-free folders and protective sheets for physical records
- Decide on access: Will the history be stored privately, shared online, or donated to an institution?



A sample entry from the APPARAT microfiche

6. Share and Educate

- Distribute the oral histories through community archives, local libraries, or universities
- Create digital collections: Upload interviews to websites, YouTube, or public archives for wider access
- Host presentations or workshops to encourage others to preserve their own histories

Book a demo!

Getting Oral History Out in the World

"Well, of course, you don't have to be famous for your life to be history."

These words, spoken by Nell Sigmon during a 1979 interview with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, capture the essence of oral history—everyone's story matters.

This idea became an unofficial motto for the Southern Oral History Program, which has spent the past 50 years collecting personal narratives to build a richer understanding of history.

This phase brings us to a crucial stage in the oral history journey: **sharing these stories with the world.**

The challenge is that while history shapes us all, not everyone actively seeks it out. This is why it's important to present oral histories in engaging, accessible, and innovative formats that can captivate different audiences.

Making oral histories accessible and engaging

From our collaborations with museums and cultural institutions worldwide, we've observed that well-crafted storytelling in public spaces can be highly effective in engaging listeners. Audio storytelling helps transform personal histories into immersive experiences, making them relatable, emotional, and memorable.

Museums22 also focuses on **GPS tours paired with audio guides**. Instead of overwhelming the visitor with information, we feel that these experiences act as a bridge between the listener and history, allowing for deeper personal connections.

Effortless Tour Creation

With our platform, designing captivating location-sensitive tours is as easy as a few clicks. Whether you are a seasoned tour operator or a newcomer to the scene, our intuitive interface allows you to create points of interest effortlessly. From there, you can customize audio and visual content to create a rich, immersive experience for your audience.

Customizable Tour Experiences

Through our platform, you can cater to the diverse preferences of your audience. Tailor tours to fit specific themes, languages, and durations, ensuring that each experience feels tailor-made. What's more, our offline access feature ensures that users can enjoy your tours even in areas with limited connectivity. Virtual mode access for GPS tours opens up new possibilities for remote exploration.

Audio-Guided Navigation

Our platform provides users with detailed, point-by-point audio guidance, making it easy to navigate unfamiliar destinations. It's like having a personal digital guide by your side, leading you every step of the way. Whether you're strolling through historic streets or hiking rugged trails, our audio guidance ensures a smooth and enjoyable journey. Define the navigational radius for each point along the route to ensure a seamless journey.

Museums22 helps institutions design point-by-point audio guidance-based customizable physical tours

By walking through historically significant places while hearing firsthand accounts, people can experience history in a way that feels immediate and impactful.

How digital storytelling helped us enhance public art

One of the more exciting projects we've worked on that combined audio guides with stories of local cultures was the Street Art Tours in South Delhi and Chennai.

The vibrant street art of Lodhi Colony, South Delhi, and Kannagi Nagar, Chennai, features works by over 50 global artists

These tours use location-based audio guides to narrate the stories behind the murals, bringing local history, culture, and artistic intent to life.

Each mural in Lodhi Colony and Kannagi Nagar reflects diverse themes, from heritage and social change to community resilience. For the visitors, this means an interactive cultural experience that is memorable.

Additionally, the use of QR codes on murals allows visitors to scan and listen to curated stories behind each artwork at their pace.

Book a demo!

The world is changing this year, and so are museums. To keep up with the changes in visitor preferences, destination patterns, and genius technological developments across museums—follow our newsletter!