

HST 585: Oral History

Spring 2014 | W 3:30-6:20



What is oral history?

Most people have learned about the past through the spoken word: informal conversations with family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Others have read printed compilations of stories in biographies, autobiographies, and popular histories. Even more people learn about the past by listening to formal interviews or watching movies that relied on firsthand accounts to recreate the past. These oral testimonies are among the most important sources a historian uses.

Oral histories are interviews conducted to gain insight into a particular event and/or experience. They are compelling because they reveal voices frequently excluded from the historical record. Take, for instance, the thousands of interviews with former slaves conducted by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s. These recorded and transcribed conversations have provided researchers, students, and relatives with valuable insight into the lives of Americans who were denied the right to learn how to read and write. Thus, their voices were omitted from archival documents and misrepresented in secondary sources, leaving a significant gap in the primary source base that the Federal Writers Project helped to rectify.

Oral histories therefore foster new interpretations of the past. Memories, however, present researchers with a variety of important challenges. Historians must begin

with an understanding of how memory is constructed and forgotten before preparing projects, conducting interviews, and writing histories. This course explores the theory, methods, and practices of oral history to provide students with the hands on experience to “do” this innovative and interactive form of history.

Course Description:

This course serves as an introduction to the philosophy, ethics, and practice of oral history. Students will receive specific training in interview, transcription, and preservation techniques, and learn about the use of oral history in historical research and analysis. The course will improve a student’s analytical and organizational skills, research methods, and writing through the act of completing an oral history project. In doing so, students will familiarize themselves with the major theoretical debates in the field and learn to evaluate, analyze, and critique those existing debates. Students will share their knowledge through in class activities and group exercises, as well as written assignments.

Questions?

Contact Professor Brittany Fremion

Email: fremi1b@cmich.edu

Office: Powers 139