



# Conducting Oral Histories for *Every House Has A Story* by Al Lima

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*Sponsored by the Preservation Society of Fall River, Arts United Fall River, Save Our Neighborhoods, and the City of Fall River*

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compiled by Stefani Koorey, Ph.D.

# Your family has a story. Are you listening?

## Why do oral histories?

- They help to preserve the past.
- They connect us with our families and their roots.
- They are a source of pride.
- They help us to connect with older members of our family.
- They help us to see older persons in a new light.
- They preserve family histories for future generations.
- If we don't do it now, this history will be gone forever.
- Your family will really appreciate that you have done this.
- They're great stories.

## Who should be interviewed?

- Start with the oldest persons in your family, including your extended family, and work down from there. Interview as many persons as time allows. In this regard, you *may want to start the interviews now*, and not wait until later in the summer. The sooner you start, the more likely you will have the time to produce a quality product that your family will admire.

- Include older persons who have lived in your house (ask neighbors how to find them).
- Include older persons in your neighborhood (neighborhood histories provide an important context for your family's history).
- If your *Every House Has a Story* is about a building other than your home, ask us whom you should interview for your project.

### How should an oral history be conducted?

- Contact the person, describe what you are doing, and schedule a time to meet.
- Provide a copy of the questions before the interview for them to review and think about. Also ask them to have old family photos available at the meeting.
- Choose a place that is quiet and where you will not be interrupted.
- Materials to bring to the interview include a writing pad, pens, a tape recorder and tapes (optional) and a video recorder (optional).
- Hold the meeting and start asking the questions.
- If the person starts to talk about topics other than the questions you are asking, that's all right; you can always come back to the questions later. The important thing is for them to say what they want to say.
- As the person is speaking, write down what they are saying. Speed-write to keep up. You will probably not be able to keep up, so ask them to repeat or go back later to review a passage that you did not transcribe adequately.
- Transcribe as if in quotes and in their first person, for example, "I graduated from Durfee in 1942, and then I was drafted into the Army."
- It will be helpful to have a tape recorder to check on sentences or words missed during the interview. However, don't consider this essential. If you don't have a tape recorder, proceed with the interview. There will be a chance to correct later.
- You can also videotape the interview, if you wish, but the interview should still be transcribed, either in person or from the video.
- After the questions have been answered, review the photos that the person provided and select those that you want to copy.

## What happens after the interview?

- Once the interview is finished, review your notes and write down words that were too hastily scribbled and not legible. Do this shortly after the interview, while the meeting is still fresh in your mind.
- Make copies of the photos and return them *promptly*. The longer you keep the photos, the more likely they will get lost. Keep these photos in a safe place; they are often the only copies available and they are very important to the person that you interviewed.
- Type up the interview text.
- Send a copy of the text to the person interviewed.
- Contact the person to schedule another meeting.
- Meet with the person again to make corrections or additions to the text and to resume talking. The person may wish to continue the interview.
- Revise the interview text to incorporate the corrections and additions.
- Give the person a copy of the final text.

## What kind of follow-up is possible?

- Enter the text and photos into the web site of *Every House Has a Story*. However, before you do, *be sure to delete any text that the person does not want to be made public*. This is an important courtesy that should be absolutely followed.
- You may also want to prepare a scrapbook that includes the text and photos. If this is for use by your family only, the person may be less sensitive about the material to include but, as a courtesy, ask them anyway. They may have their own reasons why they don't want other family member to know about certain events. Family histories can be fun, but they can also be painful and sometimes embarrassing.
- On-demand printing now makes book publishing available to everyone at a reasonable price. If your family really likes your product, ask if they would like to support its publication. However, research available publishers; some are better than others.

## What if I have questions?

- If you have questions about the oral history process, please contact us at [fallriver@mac.com](mailto:fallriver@mac.com). We will respond promptly. Good luck, and thank you for helping to preserve Fall River's history.



## Questions to ask you family, friends, and neighbors about their memories of your house.

Here are some questions that you can use to conduct an oral history of your house, your family, and Fall River. Either write down the replies, record the audio of the interview, or film the exchange to preserve not just the responses, but the person you are asking. You might be very inspired by the answers you get! One thing is certain—your historical detective work will get you so much closer to your subject than just looking up information in books and online.

### **Family background information:**

What is the correct spelling of your name?

Year of birth?

Where were you born (at home or in a hospital)?

Addresses of where your family lived.

Grandparents names, origins and occupations.

Parents names, origins and occupations.

Brothers and sisters names and occupations.

Spouse's name.

Children's names.

### **Family life:**

What was everyday life like when you were growing up?

What were family activities?

What were some of the memories or stories that your grandparents had about Fall River?

What were some of the memories or stories that your parents had about Fall River?

What were your parents and grandparents like?

What are your earliest memories?

Were children birthed at home or in a hospital; if at home, provide experiences.

How important was your ethnic culture in the ordering of the life of your family?

What were your ethnic traditions?

Did you make wine; bread; canning?

Did your family visit much?

What are some stories about your brothers or sisters? How would they like to be known?

Who were your cousins?

Who were your best friends?

### **Food and meals:**

What were your everyday meals?

What were Sunday meals like?

Breakfast?  
Your favorite foods?  
How was food preserved?

**School life:**

Where did you go to school?  
What are some of the things that you remember about school (positive or negative)?  
What were your teachers like?  
What were you taught?

**Recreation and entertainment:**

What summer games did you play with other children? How were they played?  
Where did you go swimming?  
What winter games did you play?  
Where did you slide down hills and where did you skate?  
What were your memories of Linclon Park? Sandy Beach? Other parks?  
What entertainment did you participate in as a young adult?  
Did you go to the circus?  
What restaurants did you frequent?  
What things were especially fun for you?  
How did you spend Sundays?  
What were your favorite radio and television shows?  
What was the typical evening?  
Did you catch fireflies?

**Courtship and marriage:**

How did your mother and father meet?  
How did you meet your spouse?  
How did you court her/him?  
Where did you go on dates; who went with you?  
When and where were you married?  
What was your wedding day like?  
Who was your best man and maid of honor?  
What was the reception like?  
Honeymoon?

**Chores and work:**

What was your first work experience as a child?  
What was your work experience as an adult?  
What were some of your interesting work experiences?  
What were the experiences of you or other persons working in the textile mills?  
Did you bring a dinner pail to work?

**Neighborhood experiences:**

What ethnic groups existed in your neighborhood?  
Who were your neighborhood friends?  
Where did people shop in your neighborhood?  
What shops were on the main street in your neighborhood?  
What dairies existed in the neighborhood?  
What were some of the interesting characters in the neighborhood?  
What were some of the social ills in the neighborhood, for example alcoholism?

**Christmas, holidays and special occasions:**

What was Christmas or other religious events like in your home?  
What do you remember about special occasions, like weddings and funerals?

**Downtown:**

Did you go downtown often? For what purpose and where did you go?  
What shops do you remember existing downtown?

**Religious life:**

Where did you attend church?  
What were some of the experiences that you remember about church?  
What were some of the common superstitions that you remember?

**Jargon:**

What were slang names for places and things?  
What slang sayings (or common expressions) were common when you were young (thank your lucky stars; send in the Marines; you're asking for it; I'll fix your wagon)?

**Illness:**

What were the prevalent illnesses in the neighborhood?  
How were illnesses treated?  
What were some of the contagious illnesses?  
What were some common home remedies?  
Wakes: wreaths on door; clock stopped at time of death? Other characteristics.

**The Depression:**

How did your family survive the Depression?  
How did the Depression affect your family?  
Was your family on welfare?  
Did they go to the farm?  
Were any family members in the CCC camps or in the WPA?  
What do you remember about the New Deal?  
What did your family think of the Roosevelts?



**Travel and transportation:**

How did people get around in the city?  
When did people walk to destinations?  
Did you take the train much?  
Did you travel on the Fall River Line?

**World War II:**

If you were in the service, what were your experiences in the service?  
What was the war like on the home front, such as rationing, etc.  
Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked? How did family and friends react?

**Technological changes:**

Do you remember the introduction of electricity in the neighborhood?  
How did people communicate between households before the telephone?  
What were the roads like before the city instituted plowing?

**Miscellaneous:**

What were you doing when the 1938 hurricane struck?  
What about horses in the city? How did they negotiate the hills?  
Do you remember Roosevelt or Truman visiting the city? Other personalities?  
How were cars winterized?

**Places:**

Please locate on a street map the various stores and other places that existed in your neighborhood when you were young.

Life regrets; opportunities gained; life philosophy

**Photos:**

What old photos do you have of the family or persons who lived in the house, or photos of the neighborhood?



## *Research Notes*



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