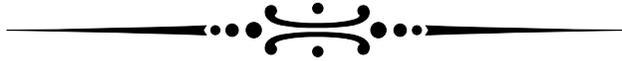


What Was It Like?

Telling Women's Stories Through Oral History



An oral history project is an exciting way to preserve the personal stories of women and men and to give them the chance to tell you "what it was really like." Thanks to modern technology—future generations will hear people's words in their own voices, with the shading, nuance, and emphasis that give language its emotional richness.

How to begin? First, know your church's history. With good preparation, you can ask pertinent questions, untangle inconsistencies, and confidently guide the interview. It is also important to be well informed about the history of your town, your region, and the country so that you can put questions into historical context.

Next, recruit your interviewees. Don't limit yourself to women or to the elderly. All church members have a perspective to offer on the roles and contributions of women. Consider using youth to interview older adults. Remember members who are homebound, but whose long experience in the church can add vital information to your archives.

Start by asking easy questions, such as name and date of birth. Ask one question at a time, and give the interviewee plenty of time to respond. Be an active listener; pick up on what gets said and ask follow-up questions. Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer, but remember that you are in charge of the interview—don't let the conversation get sidetracked.

It is valuable to hear individual stories; it is also helpful to hear different people's answers to the same questions. Allow your interviewee to talk about the negative as well as the positive; you want a full picture of the past, not just "happy history." Try to strike a balance between personal reminiscence, opinion, and fact.

The interview process is a sensitive one. The person you interview may reveal more than he or she intended; it is good to feel so comfortable that you both forget the tape recorder is on, but make sure that the interviewee is aware that the conversation will be preserved for others to hear. Avoid "off the record" comments.

There are many other components of a good oral history interview. Fortunately, a growing number of colleges and historical agencies offer training. Contact your state or county historical societies and libraries about workshops. In addition, the Anna Howard Shaw Center at Boston University School of Theology has developed an extensive training program. Contact the Center for more information (745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, www.bu.edu/sth/shaw/). Also, the American Association for State and Local History has a number of helpful resources (*see "Who Can Help Me?" for address and website.*)