**Adapted from the Vail Preservation Society Oral History Volunteer Handbook**

**Why Oral History?**

The memories, stories, and traditions of the people you interview grow out of firsthand knowledge and experience. Be sure to seek out not only what they can tell you about the past, but what they can tell you about life in the present. How have certain family or community traditions evolved? What holiday customs are practiced today that weren’t a generation ago? What special food ways and rituals are part of community or family celebrations and why? What skills and abilities are needed to practice a particular craft or trade? How these skills are learned, mastered, and passed on to younger generations? What ethnic groups were present at various times? What were their contributions to local heritage?

Whenever possible, ask for stories and anecdotes about the topic. Stories are important sources of information for our community research — they encapsulate attitudes and beliefs, wisdom and knowledge that lie at the heart of a person’s identity and experience. These stories reflect the heritage of the community, and make history relatable. Remember that the stories and memories you collect are valuable not necessarily because they represent historical facts, but because they are a particular way of looking at the world that represents our community. Stories, memories and traditions are powerful expressions of community life and values. They anchor us within a larger whole, connecting us to the past, grounding us firmly in the present, giving us a sense of identity, roots, belonging and purpose.

**Getting Started**

What is the goal of your research? What are you curious about? What do you want to find out? Do you want to learn about a special celebration in your community? Document traditional customs in your family? Find out what it was like when your mother was growing up? The best way to begin is to decide on the focus of your interview. This will determine whom you choose to interview and what sorts of questions you ask.

Having a clearly defined goal is key to conducting a successful interview. Each oral history project will have a defined scope, a beginning, an end and a plan to share the project. Once you’ve determined the focus of your interview, then what? Whom should you interview first? You might want to begin by thinking about yourself and your own interests. What sorts of questions would you like someone to ask you? What kind of responses do you think the questions would elicit? This will help you prepare for the interview experience. If possible, conduct your first interview with someone with whom you feel very comfortable, such as a close relative or a neighbor you know well. Over the course of the interview, you’ll probably pick up clues to other sources: “Uncle Don can really tell some stories about those days,” or “You should ask Yvonne Martinez — she’s the real master.”

The interview should take place in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The home of the person you are interviewing is usually the best place, but there may also be other settings that would be appropriate. Sometimes a library quiet room, a work place, a school, a church hall, or a community center can be used. A productive group of interviews can sometimes take place at regularly occurring events, such as family dinners, holiday celebrations, and work gatherings. These are often the occasions when stories are told and traditional customs observed. A room or rooms should be designated for these interviews.

**Pre-Interview Process**

After an interviewee has been identified there is some work to do that will help ensure a good interview and interviewee experience. Do research regarding the topic(s) to be covered, learning more about the interviewee and developing or adapting a questionnaire. The interviewee should be given the questionnaire in advance. This will give them time to think about the questions, refresh their memories and provide more insightful answers. They should be encouraged to review their photographs, or provided with a few images that will spark memories.

The interviewee should understand the purpose and importance of the interview: That it will be available to researchers, may inform exhibits or other educational projects and that it is an important contribution to researching and reconstructing local history.

Try not to ask yes or no questions, but questions that require a narrative answer. Don’t leave anything to chance. Make sure you have confirmed your interview and have all of your equipment, forms and supplies together the day before.

 General areas to focus on

o 1. Make the interviewee aware of the general areas of their life you would like to focus on; such as certain events that happened in Elgin/Sonoita.

o 2. Focus on is the interviewee. The individual might be nervous about their interview. It is best to give a general outline of the way the interview will go, to reassure the interviewee that there is nothing to stress about.

 Discuss the oral history release form and interview information form.

o Go over the forms with them so they know what they are doing. Have them sign the oral history release form if they are still comfortable getting interviewed. The interview information form will also be a part of the record.

 Points to make clear

 Information will not be used to make profit

 Their information is confidential

 Build rapport

o Remember: you may be evaluating the individual but they are doing the same for you. It is important to build a serious, friendly, and trustworthy relationship to make the interviewee comfortable and to have the interview be a success.

**Interview Check List**

□ Interview questions

□ Paper and pencil for note taking. If you hear a word that you want to ask about spelling, confirm a date, or think of a follow up question.

□ Digital recording device. Check ahead of time to make sure it is working and has a power supply. Electronic tablets or cell phones may also be used

□Extension cord or batteries

□ Water for you and your guest/interviewee.

□ Permission/interview release form to record the interview and a pen.

□ Interview information form

□Photo log/information form

1. Before you begin your interview is the time to take care of the paperwork by asking your guest to sign the permission forms. You will also be signing as the interviewer.

2. Let your guest know that you will be stating your name and the date at the beginning of the interview and you will be asking them to do the same.

3. Script – what to say at the beginning of your interview. \*Turn on the recording device(s)

Student 1: “Today is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I am a student at Elgin School.

Student 2: And, I am \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, a student at Elgin School. We are working on the **Shared History of the Cienega Watershed** project.

Student 1: We are here today with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. For the record I would like to ask you to tell us your name and when you were born.”

4. Proceed with your interview questions. Keep an eye on the clock, but don’t make your guest feel rushed by staring at it. You will have about an hour. We will give you a 5 minute alert when you will need to finish up your interview.

5. Thank you, be sure to thank your guest for participating in your oral history project.