



# GFWC Women's History and Resource Center

## Oral Histories Guidelines:



*“Recording the Memories and  
Experiences of GFWC Members”*





# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

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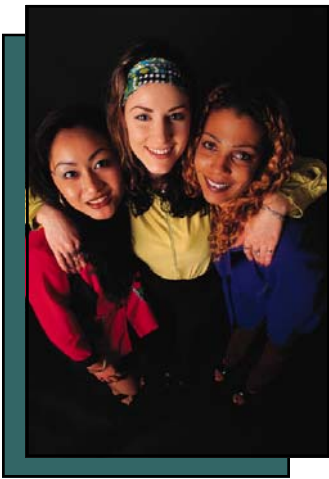
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# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

**Oral history is a method of obtaining and preserving the spoken memories and perspectives of a person with firsthand knowledge of past events. This method is important to GFWC, as it provides current and past GFWC members with a historic voice, as well as preserves GFWC history for future generations. Through oral history interviews, members and researchers will be able to learn about the lives and experiences of those involved with GFWC and understand what it means to be a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.**



## Getting Started:

It is important to have the proper equipment, a question set, and established standards for oral history interviews before you begin the process of interviewing past and current members. To this end, it may be beneficial to establish an oral history committee within a state federation and/or local GFWC club to monitor the oral history equipment, questions, and materials. Furthermore, the WHRC chairman in each state federation and/or local club should be consulted and/or involved with the oral history process to ensure that materials are properly catalogued, stored, and/or shared.

The first step is to identify past and current members with stories to share. There are no set rules for choosing an interview subject, but oral history interviews will prove more useful if the interview subject has extensive knowledge about GFWC or was involved with GFWC over an extended period of time. Prior to contacting potential interviewee(s), make sure that the appropriate interview equipment is gathered and/or available.

## Equipment:

Audio recorded oral histories are preferable to videotape, but videotape is acceptable. As most interviews will be conducted on audio cassette tape, these instructions are written accordingly. Please contact the WHRC if you plan to use videotape for special instructions on recording via visual media.

### Audio Recording Equipment

1. A tape recorder should be durable, dependable, lightweight, easily portable, and simple to use. A cassette tape recorder with a separate microphone that plugs into the recording device is recommended for practicality. Also, a recorder that uses standard-size cassettes is preferable to one that uses micro or mini-cassettes. If the person conducting the interview does not have a tape recorder and is purchasing or borrowing one, look for a recorder that produces reliable recordings with adequate sound. For example, some recording devices have the capability to dim and/or block out background noise. This will improve the sound quality of the interview. Recording devices may also be available at the local public library.

# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## Equipment:

### Audio Recording Equipment (continued):

2. Most tape recorders can be plugged into a standard electrical outlet or operated from batteries. If the tape recorder uses batteries, make sure the batteries have enough power to carry through the entire interview and/or bring extra batteries to the interview.
3. Cassette tapes should be of good quality and hold up to 60 or 90 minutes of recorded material (30 to 45 minutes on each side). The 60 minute tapes are preferable, as they tend to be stronger than the 90 minute cassettes. Please save the plastic boxes for shipping and storage.
4. A reliable microphone is vital to the interview process. A microphone that attaches to the subject's clothes and plugs into the recording device is preferable. However, a larger microphone that sits in a microphone stand in front of the interviewee will suffice. Make sure to test the microphone before arriving at the designated interview, and again before the interview begins.

## Background Research:

In preparation for an oral history interview, it is beneficial to research the interviewee's background. This information can be ascertained during a preparatory meeting with the interviewee, which can take place over the phone or in person. Another option is to give the subject a set of preparatory questions that can be answered and returned prior to the oral history interview. A sample form/list of background questions is available on page 7.

Knowledge of relevant time periods will also assist the interviewer when preparing the question set, as well as provide a better understanding of the interviewee's experiences. Minor historic research is recommended for interviewers unfamiliar with the subject(s) and/or time period(s) related to the interviewee. For example, the interviewer should read about GFWC's "Women's Crusade for Seat Belts" program that resulted in the installation of more than one million seat belts over the course of one year in 1961, if the interviewee was involved with the campaign. General historic information is available at local libraries. Please visit [www.gfwc.org](http://www.gfwc.org) for information related specifically to GFWC or contact the WHRC at [whrc@gfwc.org](mailto:whrc@gfwc.org).



# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## The Interview Process:

### Preparing for an Interview:

1. Make arrangements for an oral history interview by phone or in person. Inform the interviewee about the oral history process and explain the purpose for the interview (i.e.—preserve GFWC history; provide GFWC membership with a historic voice). Make sure to explain that the interview will last approximately one to two hours.
2. Choose an appointment time and location that is convenient for both parties. Keep in mind that environmental stimuli and background noise will affect both the quality of the recording and the interviewee's focus and comfort level. It may be preferable to conduct the oral history interview in a quiet room in a local library, community center, or home. Do not interview more than one person at a time.
3. Prepare a list of questions prior to the interview. This question set should include basic questions relating to joining and participating in GFWC, as well as more specific questions tailored to the interviewee's background. Please see page 2 for more information on background research. Do not give this list of questions to the interviewee prior to the interview; take this list of questions to the interview, as well as a pad of paper and writing utensil(s) to make notes and record the spelling of names and places. A list of sample questions and tips on how to create a question set are available on page 6.



### During the Interview:



1. Arrive a few minutes early to prepare for the interview. Plug in the recording device and test the microphone to make sure it is picking up sound and recording properly.
2. Once the interviewee arrives, chat for a few minutes before turning on the recorder. Explain the interview process and make the interviewee feel more comfortable. The interview should be treated as a question and answer conversation; furthermore, explain to the interviewee that the conversation may be somewhat one-sided (i.e.—focused on the interviewee) as to minimize interruptions. However, use of physical indications such as smiling, eye contact, and head-nodding often keeps the interviewee at ease during the interview, despite a lack of verbal input from the interviewer. Also, demonstrate the recording device for the interviewee to avoid any confusion during the interview process.
3. As recording begins, state the following: interviewer's name; date; time; location; and, purpose of the interview. Ask the interviewee to state his/her name and ask if he/she knows that the interview is being recorded.

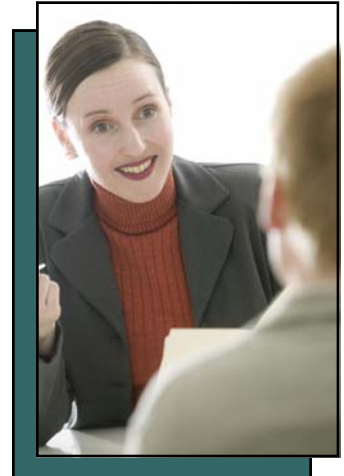
# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## The Interview Process:



### During the Interview (continued):

4. Begin the interview by asking questions from the question set. As the interview continues, the list of questions should be used as a guide, not quoted verbatim. Be sure to ask open-ended questions and/or phrase questions in ways that will evoke memories and conversation. Ask only one question at a time; more will be confusing. Questions may arise during the interview in response to the interviewee's comments and/or stories; write these questions down on a notepad to ask and/or follow up with at an appropriate time during the interview.
5. Allow the interview to progress naturally. Try not to put words in the interviewee's mouth or lead the interview in too specific a direction. As stated above, use the question set as a guide, not as an exact sequence of questions and topics. Be patient and try not to interrupt unless the interviewee begins to discuss information that does not relate to GFWC and/or the interviewee's personal experiences within GFWC. If the interviewee seems to be "misremembering" information, do not accuse or antagonize; merely attempt to gain a fuller description and/or explanation of the topic.
6. Be attentive; interviewing requires more concentration than ordinary conversation. Remember to be relaxed and put the interviewee at ease.
7. A typical interview lasts approximately one and a half hours; two hours should be the absolute maximum. If necessary, please schedule a second interview to complete the interviewee's oral history.



### Following the Interview:

1. After the interview is complete, the interviewee and interviewer should sign a statement giving permission for GFWC, GFWC staff, GFWC members, and researchers to view and use the recordings. This form should also give ownership of the original tape(s), transcripts, and related materials to GFWC and/or state and local clubs. Sensitive information may be restricted for a designated period of time (i.e.—twenty years), but this is not recommended. If the interviewee insists, please stipulate the designated restrictions on the permission/donation form. GFWC will honor such restrictions. Please see page 8 for a sample *Deed of Gift* to be used for donations to state and local clubs or contact the WHRC staff for the *Deed of Gift* to be used for donations to the GFWC Archives.
2. As soon as possible following the interview, label each cassette with the date, interviewee's and interviewer's names; and, tape number (if there is more than one tape). It is a good idea to remove the little tabs on the top edge of the cassette tapes to prevent accidental erasure.
3. Follow up the interview with a letter thanking the interviewee for his/her cooperation, as well as his/her contribution to GFWC and GFWC history.



# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## Transcription:

Transcription is a very important part of recording an oral history. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most time consuming. The primary reason for transcribing oral histories is to make analysis and use of the recordings easier and more effective. For example, a transcript provides a means of identifying the major topics and content of an oral history interview, as well as exact or approximate points at which these topics/subjects occur throughout the recording. This resource also helps to maintain the quality of the recording, as it allows researchers to scan the tape with minimal fast-forwarding and/or rewinding. Moreover, the transcript helps researchers to determine whether or not the content of an oral history interview is relevant to their research.

It is a good idea to transcribe a recording as soon as possible following an oral history interview, as the information will be fresh in the interviewer's mind. Word processors and computers tend to be more accessible than transcription machines, but all three are acceptable ways to transcribe an oral history interview. Transcribing machines are also rather expensive, so check with a local library or school to see if one is available for use. There are also professional transcription services that will transcribe the tapes for a fee; prices vary by company.

Transcriptions are a typewritten version of the audio recording. Recordings should be transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. Identify all speakers at the start of their comments, by typing their name in bolded capital letters, followed by a colon (SMITH:). Occasionally include the minute and second or the meter reading on the recorder to indicate key points during the interview and/or the general flow of the recording. Do not correct sentence structures, and in most cases, do not correct grammar or usage. Omit filler expressions such as "um" or "ah," but include such expressions as "um-hum" or "uh-uh" when used to mean "yes" or "no" in response to specific questions. Indications of pauses and/or emotions should be included in the transcript. For example, if the interviewee laughs for an extended period of time or pauses due to emotions and/or to consider an answer, include this information in parenthesis: (pause) or (interviewee is moved to tears). Be sure to include fundamental information in a transcript including the interviewer's name; interviewee's name, title (if applicable), and club; date; cassette tape number(s); and, page number(s).

Upon completion of a transcript, contact the interviewee with any follow-up questions and/or spelling inquiries. Another option is to give a copy of the transcript to the interviewee for final review. Be sure to explain that the transcript reflects the recording, and therefore, the sentence structure and grammar will not be in proper essay format. Overall, be careful during the transcription process, as content and/or meaning can get lost as information is transferred from the recording to the transcript. It is important to remain impartial and sensitive to the interviewee's experiences and reflections throughout the transcription process.



# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## Creating a Question Set:

Create a question set for an oral history interview after identifying, researching, and setting an appointment with an interviewee. The question set should include questions on personal background; time period; and, overall GFWC experience. Focus should also be placed on the interviewee's contemporary impressions and present-day retrospective. Ask **when, what, who**, and especially **why** and **how** questions; avoid questions that require only simple yes or no answers.

Keep in mind that staff, members, and researchers will be using GFWC oral histories to determine and understand the history of GFWC and GFWC members. The following questions should be used as a starting point. Use imagination and insight, and create questions that will encourage interviewees to share their GFWC experiences and memories.



### Sample Questions:

1. Brief personal background (i.e. birth date, family, childhood, etc.)
2. How did you learn about GFWC?
3. How and why did you become involved in your club? When and at what age?
4. Describe some of the programs and activities you participated in during your time in GFWC. How did volunteering make you feel?
5. Is there a program, project, issue, and/or service that was/is particularly important to you? Please explain why you feel this issue is so important and/or memorable.
6. Do you believe your activities made an impact on the lives of others? In what ways do you feel they did or did not?
7. How were/are you similar and/or different from your peers and other women in your club/community? Describe your relationship with them.
8. What did your family think about your club and volunteer work?
9. How did your life as a woman differ from the lives of men during your time in GFWC? Did GFWC affect your life as a woman?
10. Did you do anything considered controversial for women? If so, describe your activities. What did your family think?
11. In addition to your volunteer work, were you employed outside of the home? If so, what was/is your job? How did your employer and co-workers view your GFWC membership?
12. What other organizations have you been involved with? Describe your participation.
13. What have you gotten/still get from your GFWC membership and club work?
14. Are there any negatives to club membership? Is there anything about GFWC that you would change? If so, do you have any solutions?
15. Do you feel GFWC has changed since you joined? In what ways?
16. How would you assess your overall club experience?

# WHRC Guidelines for Oral Histories

## Oral History Background Information Form

This form, or a form with similar content, should be given to the interviewee prior to an oral history interview. The purpose of this form is to provide background information on which the interviewer can build a solid list of interview questions. Furthermore, this form will be preserved with any/all corresponding oral history materials and provide basic biographical information on the interviewee easily accessible to future researchers.

**Interviewee Name** \_\_\_\_\_  
(First) (Middle) (Last)

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Club Affiliation(s):** List club name, city, and state; include dates of affiliation.

(Club name) (City, State) (Date)

(Club name) (City, State) (Date)

(Club name) (City, State) (Date)

**Awards/Honors:** List any awards and/or honors received from national, state, or local GFWC clubs. Please include the date these awards and/or honors were received.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Information:** Please provide any additional information and/or significant events that should be noted in this basic biographical sketch.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# GFWC Oral History Project

## Deed of Gift Agreement

This is an agreement between the interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ and the interviewee \_\_\_\_\_, each of the undersigned persons referred to herein as interviewee and interviewer.

In consideration of having the oral history information provided by interviewee, and including the audio and/or visual recordings and any/all corresponding transcripts containing such information, become part of the \_\_\_\_\_ (insert club name), and for other good and valuable consideration, the interviewee agrees to assign to the \_\_\_\_\_ (insert club name), all rights, title, and interest in such information and the audio and/or visual recordings and any/all corresponding transcripts and materials containing such information; provided, however, that nothing in this agreement shall prohibit the interviewee from using the information for his/her own non-commercial purposes.

It is distinctly understood by interviewee that it is the interviewee's purpose and intention to vest all the incidence of absolute ownership of the property, including any patents, copyrights or trademarks, in the \_\_\_\_\_ (insert club name), from this time forward.

Interviewee:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

***This portion to be signed and dated by a club officer upon receipt of materials by the club:***

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*







