

2012

History 650 Syllabus Spring 2012

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History 650: Oral History: Theory and Practice
La Salle University, Spring 2012

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Objective:

This seminar will provide students with the foundations for designing and executing oral history research projects. Students will read and discuss literature about oral history theory and methods and will examine how historians use oral history interviews to construct interpretive historical narratives. Students will undertake independent fieldwork that will allow them to apply the methods and approaches studied in class.

Required readings:

You must read in order to participate in discussion and in order to carry out the interviewing projects. If you do not complete the readings, this will be revealed in the poor quality of work you execute in the interview projects and will be reflected in your final grade.

1. Baylor University Online Oral History Workshop:
<http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23560>
2. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (Routledge, 1991), ISBN 978-0415903721
3. Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (Pantheon Books, 1974) ISBN 978-0394478845 or (The New Press, 1997) ISBN 978-1565843424
4. Leslie Brown and Anne Valk, *Living with Jim Crow: African-American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (Palgrave Macmillan) ISBN 978-0230621527
5. Jehanne Geith, *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* (Palgrave Macmillan), 2011. ISBN 0230610625
6. Donald J. Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about their Lives* (Indiana University Press, 2006), ISBN 978-0253218421
7. Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reubard, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany: An Oral History* (Basic Books), ISBN 978-0465085729
8. Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2010) ISBN 978-0199735686

Additional readings, essential documents, and samples of required work are on Blackboard. See the schedule below for due dates of readings.

Recording equipment and supplies:

Digital voice recorders or digital video recorders

**Purchase at a store of your choice or borrow from La Salle University Media Services (Olney Room 119 – reserve through the mylasalle portal)

Digital voice recorders should come with a USB cable and record in WAV or MP3

Blank CDs and/or DVDS

Interview recordings, transcript, and field notes must be burned onto CD or DVD for submission to the instructor and deposit in an archive. Use WAV, MP3 or MPEG format.

Foot pedal (optional)

Use to manipulate the speed of the recording while playing it back for transcription. The History Department possesses one foot pedal for loan; see Lauren De Angelis, the department secretary.

Acid-free white paper

Print transcript, field notes, legal release, and other necessary forms for submission to instructor and deposit in archive.

Playback software

Free download from <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>. This software slows down the recording to allow you to transcribe more easily.

Useful websites:

H-Oralhist: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>

Veteran History Project (LOC): <http://www.loc.gov/vets/kit.html>

Grade distribution:

20% Participation in discussion (ongoing)

10% Critical analysis of online oral history interview (due February 4)

20% Recorded practice interviews (2), 10-min. transcript, field notes, self-assessment (February 18)

10% Oral report on formal field interview (April 21 or 28)

40% Field notes, complete annotated transcript, and recordings of formal field interview(s) (due April 28)

Students must submit a legal release signed by each interviewee.

Failure to submit the original signed legal release will result in a grade of incomplete.

Late assignments will result in reduced grades.

Attendance:

Three absences = a grade no higher than B.

Four absences = a grade no higher than C.

Five or more absences can result in a failing grade for the course.

Any unexcused absences lower the participation grade.

Consistent tardiness and early departures lower the participation grade.

Schedule of classes, readings, and assignments:

**Explanations of assignments are after the schedule

January 21

Discuss Baylor University's oral history manual, *Introduction to Oral History* (<http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23566>)

and Paul Thompson's "Life story interview guide" (Blackboard).

See also:

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/vets-home.html>;

<http://library.columbia.edu/indiv/ccoh.html>;

<http://www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/about/paulthompson.asp>

January 28

Discuss Terkel, *Working* (read self-selected portions from each part of the book)

View "Oral history: a century of living" (HBO documentary) in class.

See <http://www.studsterkel.org/>

February 4

Discuss internet-based oral history interviews and submit written critiques of the same.

Discuss also the websites:

1. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>

2. <http://millercenter.org/academic/oralhistory/index>

3. <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/>

4. <http://sounds.bl.uk/>

5. <http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/index.html>

February 11

Discuss *Women's Words* and <http://www.smith.edu/library/libs/ssc/vof/vof-narrators.html>

Each student will be responsible for leading discussion of one chapter of *Women's Words*. This will count toward the participation grade.

February 18

Discuss practice interviews and Raphael Samuel's "Perils of the Transcript" (Blackboard).

Submit recordings of both practice interviews, a ten-minute transcript from one practice interview, field notes for each interview, and a written self-assessment (4-6 pages).

February 25

Discuss *Living with Jim Crow*. See also <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/rbmscl/btv/inv>

March 3

Discuss *Gulag Voices* and <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/home/homepage>

Students' field interview topic and interviewees must have been selected by this date; provide the instructor with a one-paragraph typed description of the topic and interviewees' names.

March 10 Spring Break

Work on Formal Field Interview Project

Read *What We Knew* (read parts one and two selectively; read parts three and four closely)

March 17

Discuss *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany*.

March 24

Discuss Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation*.

March 31

No class. Work on Formal Field Interview Project.

April 7 Easter

No class. Work on Formal Field Interview Project.

April 14

Discuss Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*.

April 21**Oral Presentations**

Half of the class will deliver oral presentations on their field interviews (see page 6 of the syllabus)

April 28**Oral Presentations**

Remaining half of the class will deliver oral presentations on their field interviews.

Everyone must submit recordings, annotated transcripts, field notes, legal releases, etc. Submit all materials in a large envelope; place disks in small envelopes. Do not staple transcripts or field notes; use clips instead. Give all materials for archival submission to the instructor, who will arrange their delivery to the appropriate archive.

May 5

Discuss selected chapters from Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Blackboard)

Participation (20%):

Students must complete all assigned readings and be prepared to discuss them in depth in class, according to the schedule in the syllabus. At the graduate level, students should take the initiative in posing questions for discussion and in contributing analysis and observations to discussion. Students are expected to critique readings and to respond to other students' contributions to discussion. If students do not volunteer comments, I will call on them to speak. Students who consistently have little or nothing to contribute to discussion might receive F's for their participation grades.

Critical analysis of online oral history interview (due February 4):

Write a four to five page critique of an oral history interview from one of the following collections:

1. Oral Histories of the American South (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>)
2. Miller Center of Public Affairs (UVA) Presidential Oral History Program (<http://millercenter.org/academic/oralhistory/index>)
3. Rutgers Oral History Archives: World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Cold War (<http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/>)
4. British Library Archival Sound Recordings (<http://sounds.bl.uk/>)
– only Holocaust survivor interviews are fully accessible
5. Experiencing War: Stories from the Veterans History Project (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/index.html>)

Choose an interview that is at least one hour long or compare and contrast two shorter interviews. Be prepared to present the critique in class. Evaluate the interviewer's technique using criteria based on guidelines provided by Ritchie and Yow, as well as your own standards. In addition, assess the organization and accessibility of the web site you used. Use size 12 font; double-space the text. Cite interviews using *Chicago Manual of Style* format.

Two Practice Interviews (due February 18):

Despite the designation "practice," a high level of professionalism is expected. Interview family members, friends, or work colleagues (the older, the better). Interview each for at least thirty minutes, record the interview and burn it to CD or DVD. Choose a topic or topics from the Paul Thompson questions. Transcribe the first ten minutes from one of the practice interviews. Follow the transcription guidelines in the Baylor University Style Guide (Blackboard). Put a time stamp on each page of the interview transcript (see examples on Blackboard). Write field notes (see examples on Blackboard) and a 4-6 page evaluation of the interview experiences, critiquing your strengths and weaknesses as an interviewer, explaining differences and similarities between the two interviews and discussing how you might improve your technique and preparation in future interviews.

You must submit to me by the dates indicated in the syllabus, audio or video recordings of both interviews on CD or DVD in WAV, MP3, or MPEG format, a typed transcript of ten minutes from one of the interviews, typed field notes, and a typed evaluation. Submit all materials in a large envelope labeled with your name; enclose disks in small envelopes; staple papers. In class, each student will spend about ten minutes discussing what he or she learned from the practice interviews. It is not necessary to obtain a legal release from practice interviewees, unless the practice interview will be deposited along with the formal field interview.

Practice interviews may be conducted by phone or Skype.

Formal Field Interview (due April 28):

Each student will select a person to interview and will conduct the interview project according to the instructor's requirements and those of the library or archive where the interview materials

will be deposited. Formal field interviews should be conducted face-to-face. Try to choose a quiet location in consultation with the interviewee.

Interviewees must be one of the following: 1) U.S. war veteran, 2) Christian Brother, 3) a La Salle University faculty or staff member (including retirees) or alumnus/alumna, or 4) a longtime resident of a neighborhood near La Salle (Olney, Germantown, Logan, Hunting Park). The product of the fieldwork will be a primary historical source in the forms of an audio recording and a complete annotated transcript, accompanied by a legal release and field notes. The source will be made available to other historians for research by depositing it into an accessible archive approved by the instructor. These archives are presently the La Salle University Library and Archives and the U. S. Library of Congress.

The instructor must approve interviewees in advance and will provide a list of Christian Brothers and La Salle faculty, staff, and alumni who are a priority to interview. Students are responsible for setting up the interviews and designing the questionnaires. Interviewees should be older people (over sixty), preferably at or near the end of their careers and possessing an appropriate frame of mind in which to reflect upon their lives. Exceptions to the age requirement may be made for veterans of wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. If you choose to interview a veteran, check his or her name in the LOC database. You should not interview someone who has already been interviewed at length.

The interview should take the form of a life history, but should focus on experiences at La Salle, as a Christian Brother, developments in the neighborhood(s) near La Salle, or military training and experiences (as appropriate). The purpose of the interview is to collect information that would be useful to historians conducting research. Your approach and questions must reflect familiarity with techniques and approaches discussed on the Baylor website and in the other required readings for the course.

Interviews about the history of La Salle, its surrounding neighborhoods, or of the Christian Brothers must be deposited at the La Salle University library and archive, according to guidelines provided below. Interviews with U.S. war veterans must be deposited at the Library of Congress (LOC), according to LOC guidelines. All LOC forms must be completed and submitted with the interview materials (see <http://www.loc.gov/vets/> for forms). You must register the interview online with LOC and obtain a registration number to place with your interview materials for mailing. Obtain a registration number before submitting materials to the instructor and give the instructor a printout of the page with the registration number. The instructor will deposit the interviews with the La Salle archive and the LOC.

Questions for interviews of military veterans can be selected from the questionnaires on the LOC website. Those interviewing Lasallians may seek assistance from the instructor and University Archivist Bro. Joe Grabenstein in composing questions. Questions on early life and family life may be chosen from the comprehensive questionnaire designed by Paul Thompson (see Blackboard). You are encouraged to submit interview questions to the instructor for feedback, before you begin interviewing. Submit the questions well in advance of the interview (at least 72 hours in advance).

The student should conduct some background research into the narrator's work and life in order to compose interview questions. If you choose interviewees affiliated with La Salle University, you should seek research assistance from Bro. Joseph Grabenstein, the university archivist (College Hall, Room 101; email: grabenst@lasalle.edu; telephone: (215) 951-1294. If you choose to research La Salle University's history, you must remember at all times that you are **not** conducting a publicity project for the university.

You must conduct at least two hours of recorded interviewing time. You must obtain signed legal releases from the interviewee. After each interview session, students should make a copy of the original digital recording. You should begin transcribing after the first interview session. The interview should be annotated (see instructions below).

The interview will be graded on the basis of the following:

1. historical value of the interview
2. interviewer's skill in posing questions
3. avoidance of errors such as interrupting the interviewee or failing to pursue potentially productive new avenues of inquiry
4. audio quality of the recording
5. interviewer's professionalism in conducting the interview
6. accuracy of the transcript; usefulness of the annotations

You should have a preliminary conversation with the interviewee to explain the project and make the interviewee feel comfortable with you. Do not speak excessively about yourself during the interview, even if the interviewee seems interested. Do show sympathy if the interviewee discusses traumatic memories.

Original, signed legal releases must be obtained for archival deposit. Recorded interview sessions, transcripts, field notes, legal releases and logs must be submitted to the instructor. The recorded interview sessions must be submitted on CDs or DVDs in WAV or MP3 format; you must save to a separate CD the transcripts and field notes in PDF, DOC or DOCX file format. In addition to electronic copies of documents, you must also submit high-quality printed copies of documents to the instructor. The instructor will arrange for deposit of materials with the Library of Congress and La Salle University.

Oral reports (April 21 and 28):

Students will report in class about their formal field interviews. Discuss the interview design, preparation for it, significance of information gleaned during the interview, and strengths and weaknesses of your approach. You should use visual aids (either PowerPoint or handouts incorporating photographs), outlines, and any other helpful accompanying materials. Play a short excerpt (1-3 mins.) from your interview. Reports should last from fifteen to twenty minutes; we should allow ten minutes after each report for questions and answers. Reports that fall considerably below fifteen minutes will receive reduced grades. If you talk for much longer than twenty minutes, I will have to cut you off, in order to give other students time to deliver their presentations. Your presentation will be graded on the content delivered before I cut you off.

Field notes (due April 28):

Your field notes must identify the interviewee and yourself, describe preparatory work you did for the interview, and describe the setting of the interview and demeanor of the interviewee. Note the mood and mannerisms of the interviewee, and any other information that might be of interest to an historian listening to the recording and attempting to interpret it. Follow the examples given by the sample field notes on Blackboard. Your choice of information to convey may be adapted to your personality, but the more detail you can provide, the better. Field notes should be 2-5 pages in length.

Annotated Transcript: (due April 28)

You must submit a complete annotated transcript of your formal field interview(s). Follow the transcription guidelines in the Baylor University Institute for Oral History Style Guide (Blackboard). Allow time to replay the recording and edit the transcript for accuracy. If you are unsure of the correct spelling of some words and names, please contact the interviewee for confirmation. Do include in the transcript your questions and comments that were voiced in the interview. Do not correct an interviewee's grammar, colloquialisms, or regional dialect. Do not attempt to render foreign accents or nonstandard pronunciations in the transcription.

Annotations provide helpful contextual information and are based on minimal research in university archives, online databases or reputable websites. For an interview of three hours or more, minimal annotation is required (to explain obscure references or jargon). For an interview of two hours, extensive annotation is necessary to provide contextual information about people, places, and events referred to by the interviewee (provide information from your research and cite the sources).

Insert a time stamp at or near the top of each page of the transcript (indicating how much time has passed since the beginning of the interview session). Insert time stamps only after you have completed editing for accuracy. Use a standard font in size 12. Print on one side only of white paper. Save the transcript to disk in DOC, DOCX or PDF.

Legal Release (due April 28):

You **must** obtain an original signed legal release from the interviewee(s) in the formal field interview. If you are interviewing a person with La Salle connections, the instructor will provide you with a blank legal release form. For veterans, you must use the LOC legal release forms. You should explain the legal release to the interviewee before the interview begins. Obtain the interviewee's signature at the end of the session. Obtain a signature for each session of the interview. The interviewee has the right to make changes to the legal release. If the interviewee balks at signing the legal release, contact the instructor as soon as possible. In addition to the signed legal release, you must ask the interviewee at the beginning of the recorded interview for oral permission to record.