

2010

History 650 Syllabus Spring 2010

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Barbara, "History 650 Syllabus Spring 2010" (2010). *All Oral Histories*. 19.
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History 650: Oral History: Theory and Practice
La Salle University, Spring 2010

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Appointments available upon request

Purpose:

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. In addition, students will undertake fieldwork that will allow them to apply the methods and approaches studied in class. Students are expected to undertake fieldwork independently and to choose interviewees who are either U.S. war veterans, Christian Brothers, or someone who has attended or worked at La Salle University. 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.

Readings:

Students should obtain the most recent editions of the following readings:

1. Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, ISBN 978-0195154344
2. Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd edition, ISBN 978-0-759106550
3. Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, ISBN 978-1565846562
4. Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times*, ISBN 978-0801484674
5. *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History*, edited by Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, ISBN 978-0813333663
6. Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reubard, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany: An Oral History*, ISBN 978-0465085729
7. Portelli, Alessandro. *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, ISBN-13: 978-1403980083

Photocopies will be distributed in class of Jean Seder, *Voices of Kensington: Vanishing Mills, Vanishing Neighborhoods*. Copies of the Annie Belle Barbour and Bessie Johnson interviews will be distributed on CD. 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:

Students should use digital voice recorders or digital video recorders when recording interviews. La Salle University Media Services (Olney Room 119) loans digital voice recorders and digital

video recorders to students. Equipment should be reserved in advance through the mylasalle portal (see <http://www.lasalle.edu/mms>). If you wish to purchase your own digital voice recorder, be advised that suitable versions are available in stores for \$50 or less. Use the highest quality setting when recording and turn off the voice recognition feature. If you purchase a digital voice recorder, be sure it comes with a USB cable and that it records in WAV or MP3. Make sure the recorder has enough recording time available before you do the interview.

Students will need to purchase blank CDs or DVDs and burn their interview recordings onto CD or DVD. You can download recordings from the digital voice recorder to a computer via a USB cord. For CDs, use WAV or MP3 recording format. Format your CDs as data disks, not audio disks, so that the disks can be played on a computer. If your audio files are too large for a CD, you should burn them onto a DVD. If you use a digital video recorder, you will need to store the recordings on DVDs. La Salle University Media Services staff (Olney Room 117) will help you with technical issues. You can also search the archives of the H-Oralhist listserv for technical and interviewing advice: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>

You should obtain free transcription software from <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>. This software slows down the recording to allow you to transcribe more easily.

The History Department has a foot pedal, which you can use to manipulate the speed of the recording while playing it back for transcription. You can borrow the foot pedal from Jen Smith, the department secretary.

Schedule of classes:

Below each date is a list of the readings we will discuss on that date. You must have read those materials before class in order to participate in discussion. See pages 4-6 for explanations of assignments.

January 19

Discuss Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* and Yow, Chapter 1 and Appendices of *Recording Oral History*. Using Paul Thompson's "Life story interview guide" (Blackboard), you will practice asking interview questions of classmates.

January 26

Discuss Terkel, *Hard Times*; Frisch, "Oral history and *Hard Times*: review essay" OHR (Blackboard); and Yow, Chapter 2.

February 2

Discuss Yow, chapters 3 and 8, and interviews of Annie Belle Barbour and Bessie Johnson and field notes (audio recordings and transcripts available on disk to be distributed in class).

February 9

Discuss internet-based oral history interviews and submit written critiques of the same. Yow, Chapters 4 and 5.

February 16

No class. Work on practice interviews.

February 23

Discuss practice interviews, chapters 6 and 9 of Yow. and Raphael Samuel's "Perils of the Transcript" (Blackboard). Submit recordings, ten-minute transcripts of practice interviews, and comparative essays.

March 2

Discuss Seder, *Voices of Kensington* (distributed in class), excerpts from other Kensingtonians (Blackboard), and chapter 7 of Yow. 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 9

No class – Spring Break

March 16

Discuss Dublin, *When the Mines Closed* and chapter 10 of Yow; view "Oral history: a century of living" (HBO documentary) in class.

March 23

Discuss *A Revolution of Their Own*; view "Kolyma" in class.

March 30

Discuss *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany*; view "Swimming in Auschwitz" in class.

April 6

Discuss Portelli's *The Order Has Been Carried Out* and chapter 11 of Yow.

April 13

No class. Work on field interviews

April 20**Oral Presentations**

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

April 27**Oral Presentations**

Remaining half of the class will deliver oral presentations on their field interviews; all members of the class must submit recordings, transcripts, field notes, legal releases, etc. Submit all materials in a large envelope; enclose disks in small envelopes.

Grade distribution:

Participation in discussion (ongoing)	20%
Critical analysis of online oral history interview (due February 9).....	10%
Recorded practice interviews (2), 10-min. transcript, comparative essay (due Feb. 23)	20%
Oral report on formal field interview (April 20 or 27).....	10%
Field notes, complete annotated transcript, and recordings of formal field interview(s) (due April 27).....	40%

Students must submit a legal release signed by each interviewee. Failure to submit the signed legal release will result in a grade of incomplete.

Grades will be reduced for late submission of assignments. Failure to submit required materials (including a signed legal release) by the final deadline may result in a grade of “incomplete” for the course. See below for explanations of assignments.

Attendance:

Attendance at all class sessions is obligatory. A student with three absences can earn no higher than a B. A student with four absences can earn no higher than a C. Excessive absences will result in a failing grade for the course. Any unexcused absences will affect the grade for participation. Consistent tardiness and early departures will also negatively affect the participation grade.

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 9):

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>)
6. Arizona Memory Project: Oral Histories of Gila County (<http://azmemory.lib.az.us/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=/ghmoral>)

7. Warwickshire County Council's Working Lives Project (<http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/workinglives>)
8. Nevada Test Site Oral History Project (<http://digital.library.unlv.edu/ntsohp/>)
9. Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project (<http://www.densho.org>)
--Registration and 1-2 business day wait is required for access

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.

Practice Interviews (due February 23):

Before students begin their formal fieldwork, they should conduct two practice interviews of family members, friends, or work colleagues (the older, the better). One interviewee should be male and the other female. These interviews must be recorded and each should last at least thirty minutes. For the practice interview questions, choose one or several themes, such as work, leisure, childrearing, education, religion, military service, or community involvement. You may base your questions on those provided by Paul Thompson (Blackboard) or you may compose your own. You must transcribe the first ten minutes from one of the practice interviews. Follow the transcription guidelines in the Baylor University Style Guide (Blackboard) when you transcribe your practice interview. Write a 2-3 page comparative essay, explaining any differences between the two interviews and to what you attribute these differences (gender, class, culture, interviewer's preparation and technique, interviewer's relationship to interviewee). You must submit to me by the date indicated in the syllabus, recordings of both interviews on CD or DVD, a typed transcript of ten minutes from one of the interviews, and a typed comparative essay. Submit all materials in a large envelope; 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.

Formal Fieldwork (due April 27):

For formal fieldwork, each student will choose a research topic and will select a person to interview about this topic. Acceptable interviewees are people who attended or worked at La Salle University, Christian Brothers, or U.S. war veterans. 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 recent wars. I prefer that you NOT interview a close relative for your formal field interview, but exceptions may be made for veterans of recent wars. If you choose to interview a veteran, check his or her name in the LOC database. I prefer that you 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, or military training and experiences (as appropriate). The purpose of the

interview is to collect information that would be useful to historians conducting research. You must study the manual by Ritchie in order to be prepared for your interview(s).

Interviews about La Salle's history or that of the Christian Brothers must be deposited at the La Salle University 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 will also have to 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. 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 me and 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 me 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

Do not insert too much about yourself into 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. Copies of all recorded interview sessions, transcripts, field notes, legal releases and logs must be submitted to the instructor for grading purposes. The instructor will keep these copies for future use as instructional material (unless the interviewee objects). The recorded interview sessions should

be submitted on CDs or DVDs; you must save *pdf* or *doc* files of the transcripts, field notes, and logs on compact disks. In addition to electronic copies of documents, you must also submit printed copies of documents to the instructor.

Oral reports (April 20 and 27):

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 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 27):

Your field notes should 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 my field notes accompanying the Annie Belle Barbour and Bessie Johnson interviews. Your choice of information to convey may be adapted to your personality, but the more detail you can provide, the better.

Transcripts (see above for due dates):

You must submit a ten-minute transcript of your practice interview and a complete transcript of your formal field interview(s). Please do your own transcriptions, rather than turning to a professional, or to a friend or relative. If you do outsource your transcription, you must edit the transcript(s) yourself. When the instructor grades the transcripts, she will compare them to the recordings in order to check the transcripts for accuracy. Follow the transcription guidelines in the Baylor University Institute for Oral History Style Guide (Blackboard). You should obtain free transcription software from <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>. This software slows down the recording to allow you to transcribe more easily.

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. 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). See the required reading *A Revolution of their Own* for examples of annotation. Insert a time stamp on each page of the transcript (indicating how much time has passed since the beginning of the interview session). Use a normal font in size 12; print on white paper. Also save the transcript to disk.

Legal Release (due April 27):

You **must** obtain a signed legal release from the interviewee involved 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. 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. You must also ask the interviewee at the beginning of the recorded interview for permission to record.