

# Why Do Oral History?

By Howard L. Sacks



*A myriad of projects* capture the interest and energies of individuals and organizations conducting oral history projects nationwide. Last week, the Women's Circle of Shiloh Baptist voted to document this inner city church's hundred-year history. Ed Panello's veterans group has expressed interest in preserving the experiences of soldiers who fought in World War II. The Springfield Historical Society's recent recruits have proposed collecting materials on the railroad industry that once shaped community life. And Zevan Corporation's business manager believes it's a great idea to document the trade skills of the company's machinists.

But why bother? To those devoted to doing oral history, the answer may seem self-evident; indeed, just posing the question may border on blasphemy. But the answers to this question are, in fact, many and complex; those contemplating an oral history project often jump into research without carefully considering their motivations and goals. Why do you want to do this work? What do you hope to accomplish? Taking time to understand why you're doing oral history is essential to the success of your project. Be sure to bring other interested parties into the conversation, no matter how confident you are of the rightness of your motivations.

Failing to first ask *why* inevitably results in one of two all-too-common outcomes. You end up with a box of worthless materials that gather dust on a shelf because nobody knew what to do with the stuff. Or you find that the public isn't interested because you assumed that everyone would share your sense that the subject is worthwhile.

It's all too easy to jump ahead to what is undoubtedly the most exciting part of any oral history project—sitting down with people to conduct interviews. But failing to first ask *why* inevitably results in one of two all-too-common outcomes. You end up with a box of worthless materials that eventually gather dust on some shelf because nobody really ever knew what to do with the stuff once it was collected. Alternatively, you debut your project only to find that the public isn't interested because you assumed, in error, that everyone would share your sense that the subject is inherently worthwhile.

WHO'S INVOLVED?

Any oral history project involves a variety of participants, each with his or her own needs and interests. Why do you *as an individual* want to do oral history? Perhaps you're an archivist or librarian, in which case this work may constitute part of your occupation. If you're a student, oral history research might well contribute to a paper or thesis leading to an academic degree. Volunteers, who conduct many oral history projects, participate because they're interested in the subject, want to develop new skills, or relish a personal challenge.

I teach a seminar on fieldwork at Kenyon College, a small undergraduate institution in rural Ohio. Most of our students come from metropolitan areas; to them, the midwestern rural landscape seems a world apart from the skyscrapers and manicured suburbs of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. The students who find their way to my seminar are typically motivated by a desire to engage the surrounding community, to learn something about a rural world that they are unlikely to encounter at any other point in their lives.

As I fashion each project that becomes the focus of my students' fieldwork, I'm careful to keep their personal motivations in mind. Experience tells me that their enthusiasm for and commitment to the research will be greatest if the work addresses the interests that brought them to the course in the first place.

Ignoring individual interests—and agendas—can contribute to several difficulties in the research process. One crucial decision in any project is determining who will conduct the interviews that lie at the core of any oral history effort. Let's say that a town bicentennial committee plans to produce a film documenting local history. A person joins the project mainly to impress others with her great personal knowledge of the community or to shape the town's image as portrayed in the film. Recognizing that this person is likely to impose her views on others, the good project planner does not assign her to the role of interviewer; instead, that person is asked to help in other areas where she can be productive but not quite so directive.

Individuals do the work of oral history, but projects are typically organized and sponsored by *groups* or *organizations*. Like individuals, groups have their own reasons for doing things; if they're formally constituted as an organization, those reasons should be articulated in a mission statement. For example, Kenyon's Rural Life Center, which I direct, seeks "to promote educational, scholarly and public projects that enhance the quality of life in Knox County, Ohio." A local historical society takes as its charge the documentation and preservation of life in a particular community. A community college is devoted to the educational enrichment of its students. An ethnic organization may be created to provide its members with economic opportunities and to enhance the public image of the group.

It's important to match the goals of your project with those of the organizations you hope to work with. Bear in mind that most organizations don't have "conduct an oral history project" as a stated goal. Therefore, you will likely be in the position of having to enlist the support of a cooperating institution. Often, the impulse is to explain why *you* wish to do a project. But to be truly effective, focus instead on how the project addresses the *group's* central concerns. How does this work benefit the organization, tie into its mission, enhance its value?

Most organizations don't have "conduct an oral history project" as a stated goal. To be truly effective, focus on how the project addresses the *group's* central concerns. How does this work benefit the organization, tie into its mission, and enhance its value?

Kenyon College has lent its support to public oral history projects in part because it reaps numerous and demonstrable benefits from them. In offering students the opportunity to seriously engage rural life, Kenyon distinguishes itself from other institutions competing for qualified students; its admissions office highlights this opportunity in its publications and campus tours. Ongoing contact with the surrounding rural community affords students a unique experience of diversity. And the public projects emanating from our oral history research improve town-gown relations.

Most important to planning any oral history project is the perspective of the *community under study*. We know why we want to do this project and how our work complements the interests of a sponsoring organization. But how does the proposed oral history project address the needs and interests of those who will participate as subjects and the broader groups they represent? At the very least, those you intend to interview must be sufficiently interested in the project to cooperate. But the best oral history projects do more than this by taking time to identify and respond to community concerns.

In developing a documentary project on the history of our county's African American community, my students and I spent several months becoming better acquainted with local black life. We attended area churches, visited locations significant to black history, and engaged in casual conversations with the area's African American inhabitants. We then invited several dozen black residents to Kenyon for a meeting to discuss the character of local black life. In the course of that meeting, we learned several things that helped define the project to follow.

These residents expressed a clear desire to have the wider community appreciate their history. As one gentleman put it, "Black folks have been here as long as white folks, and it's time they understood the contribution we've made." They lamented the fact that their history appeared nowhere in the county's historical society museum and wanted that to change. This aspect was very important to those of us contemplating the project. We knew that invisibility—maintaining a low community profile—is a tactic minority groups frequently use to avoid prejudice and discrimination, and we were concerned at the outset that local black residents might resist publicly telling their story.

Shortly before our gathering, two elderly members of the black community had passed away. Both of these individuals had possessed knowledge about the community that extended into the nineteenth century; beyond the keen sense of personal loss, residents also felt the loss of a connection to their collective past. Clearly, these sad events prompted a strongly felt need to document their history.

But their motivations to participate in an oral history project related to the present as much as the past. Many older residents noted a decline in activities that previously had brought the community together. Ironically, the end of segregation reduced the pressure for exclusive black gatherings—whether it was through the enforcement of "colored day" at the community pool or the creation of black-sponsored clubs and social events. The migration of youth to the city in the 1960s further eroded the black community. There was a hunger for something that would enhance sociability and community identification.

Hearing this community perspective gave us a clear direction for the project. We would gather oral histories and other materials and fashion them into an exhibit that would travel to

area schools, libraries, and churches before its permanent installation in the county historical society museum. As part of our effort to collect materials, we would hold a public event at the county public library, inviting everyone with relevant recollections, photographs, or other materials to share what they had. Taken together, the research and resulting exhibit would begin to document a community's past and support its present.

Oral history projects must address the needs and interests of all the participating groups:

- ◆ individuals conducting the research
- ◆ sponsoring organizations
- ◆ communities under study
- ◆ audiences for the project

This example calls to mind an additional participant, the *audience*. Needless to say, any public oral history project must pay attention to its audience. Oftentimes, the primary concern is to attract people to your project. Here, too, identifying the interests of those involved can enable you to fashion a project of interest to others.

One useful way to think about projects and their audiences involves the distinction between *inreach* and *outreach*. Inreach projects are directed primarily to participants in the phenomenon you are studying. A project documenting the history of a fraternal lodge or church, for example, would be of interest primarily to members of that organization. Because your audience has a direct connection to your subject, they're likely to be enthusiastic. Indeed, many of the people in your audience may have participated in the research itself (a fact you should be sure to acknowledge in any project debut).

There was a strong inreach component to our local black history project, and some of the audience members' motivations were typical of this type of project. When the exhibit debuted at the county historical society, the entire black community was in attendance, a crowd larger than any the museum had ever encountered. People took great pleasure in seeing old photographs of family and friends, many now departed. They read interview excerpts on the exhibit panels with great interest; what our interviewees said provided direct insights into their lives. Taken as a whole, the exhibit offered tangible validation of the community and generated a strong sense of pride.

Think about projects as *inreach* and *outreach*. Inreach projects are directed primarily to participants in the phenomenon you are studying. Outreach projects introduce something to audiences who may not have direct familiarity with the subject.

In contrast, outreach projects are designed to introduce something to audiences who may not have direct familiarity with the subject at hand. It's often harder to generate public interest in this type of project because people don't immediately see its relevance to their daily lives. As a result, the narrative approach and content presented will of necessity be somewhat different from those of an inreach project. You may need to explain more explicitly the significance of the project and be sure not to assume the audience is already familiar with the details of whatever you're exploring. Audiences for an outreach project come for their own reasons—to be entertained, to learn something new, or to express a general interest in history.

At this point, we can begin to appreciate the importance of asking why you should conduct a project. First, doing oral history is hard work that requires significant resources. How many projects have initially attracted a horde of interested volunteers, who subsequently disappeared in the course of training and interviewing? Unless the activities are designed to be personally fulfilling, volunteers are unlikely to endure the hard work and logistical details that accompany any oral history project.

Second, your goals for doing oral history affect every step of the research process. Consider these questions: Whom should I interview, and what questions should I ask? How many individuals? What other materials do I need to collect? What will I do with the materials once they're collected? How will I present my work to the public? Without a clear sense of mission and purpose, your responses to these and other questions will tend to be ad hoc, making it difficult to fashion a thorough and cohesive project.

Third, knowing why you are doing this is essential to communicating with the public. When you contact prospective interviewees, you'll need to convincingly explain why you're engaged in this effort if you want to solicit their cooperation. To generate community interest, I've always found it valuable to obtain local media coverage early on in the project; that way, people will know something about my project before I begin to line up participants. Here, too, it's important to clearly state your motivations for embarking upon the project.

Fourth, funding organizations require a clear explanation of your reasons for proposing the project. Grant applications typically include the why question as part of the written narrative that accompanies any funding request. But even if the process is more informal, you'll need to thoughtfully convey your goals to anyone you hope will support your work.

Fifth, having a clear idea of your project goals is essential to evaluating your success. Funding agencies invariably require that you identify assessment strategies. But whether or not you receive outside funding, careful reflection on the impact of your effort should constitute the final step of every oral history project.

Understand why you are conducting oral history so that you can

- ◆ maintain participant enthusiasm
- ◆ guide decision-making
- ◆ communicate effectively with the public
- ◆ make the case for funding
- ◆ evaluate the success of your project

#### WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Participants' motivations constitute an important backdrop for defining your oral history project. It's important as well to think about the ultimate purpose of the effort with the help of three different models: *documentary*, *interpretive*, and *civic*.

#### *The Documentary Approach*

Documentary projects seek to preserve and present information about a topic. They are principally descriptive. Think, for example, of any so-called documentary film. The fundamental question is: What is it?

Preservation is a fundamental goal of any good oral history project. Gather the stories that provide a window to the past and save them for posterity. That's why careful preservation of the valuable physical materials collected in any project—audio and video recordings, photographs, artifacts—is such an important issue, treated at length later in this volume.

In public history projects, a primary outcome of documentary efforts involves sharing what was learned with a broader community. Rarely, except perhaps in genealogical research or personal family histories, is documentation conducted for the sake of those conducting the project alone. Not long ago, I attended a presentation sponsored by my local historical society about Hiawatha Park in Mount Vernon, Ohio, Knox County's largest town and county seat. The presenter, an elderly gentleman who had developed an interest in the subject, showed slides from his collection of postcard photographs of the park, illustrating the various buildings and activities to be found there. We learned that Hiawatha Park was a popular amusement park from 1890 until World War I, that an electric trolley transported visitors from the train station in nearby Mount Vernon, and that the original site of the park is now the county fairground.

The presentation prompted comments from the audience of mostly older men and women. Some offered childhood reminiscences or stories they had heard from their parents. One gentleman noted that a small building from the original park, with its Victorian gingerbread decoration, still stands amid the current barns and exhibition buildings at the fairground.

All this is interesting enough. But why is it important to us now? There was more to know—to understand—about Hiawatha Park that didn't make it into the presentation. As a suburban retreat frequented by travelers from Akron, Canton, and Columbus, the park illustrates that the American urge to escape from the city had already begun to express itself more than a century ago. The inclusion of a new 1,500-seat theater on the grounds suggests how important entertainment and culture had become in a small midwestern town.

Focusing exclusively on descriptive detail, as this gentleman did, missed the park's broader significance. Local historical museums can make similar choices in their exhibits. Oftentimes, these museums are stuffed with interesting artifacts collected in the area. But no attempt is made to say anything about these items apart from their brief description (e.g., "1862 Knox County Quilt") and physical collection in areas designated for the kitchen, parlor, church, and entertainment.

One particular type of documentary research is worth noting because it underlies many oral history projects. Speaking of his own discipline, the scholar Bruce Jackson called it "salvage folklore." Such projects are defined by a strong motivation to document some phenomenon that is fast disappearing—a dying craft or occupational tradition, or the recollections of aging veterans.

Certainly, this work has value. Anyone who has lost an elderly contact to death is keenly aware of the fact that some interviews, like some projects, should not be delayed. The sense of losing knowledge can be a powerful motivator directing oral history research. But as Jackson rightly notes, when oral history involves a last-ditch effort to capture something before it disappears, it's often already too late to find the sources needed for effective documentation.

Salvage efforts may imply that anything old is worth preserving, but, of course, that just isn't so. Not all historical material is equally important. We all distinguish the trivial from the significant in our everyday lives. Surely, one important goal of oral history is to demonstrate that our everyday experiences and perspectives *are* important, that history is not just the purview of the rich and powerful. But there is a danger in setting out to document something simply because it might soon be lost without carefully considering the value of the enterprise.

One criterion of value to consider is the contemporary significance of the material you want to collect. History buffs (which is to say, everyone who has considered doing oral history) are inclined to find the past inherently interesting. But as any high school history teacher can attest, that is an attitude not universally shared. As a society, we are drawn far more easily to whatever is new and improved than to the lives of our grandparents.

I once organized a national tour of working cowboys who practiced traditions—storytelling, poetry, and music—long associated with that line of work. In the current context, we can think of their concerts as public oral history performances. We called the tour The Old Punchers Reunion and emphasized the connection to history with publicity materials featuring old pictures of working cowboys. The tour was a success, but in the process we learned that history *per se* doesn't always sell. The next time around, we renamed it The Cowboy Tour and gave the publicity a more contemporary look. The public was drawn to appreciating the richness of their own world, which includes cowboys who recite poetry and do rope tricks.

In that same vein, documentary projects are often most effective and attract the largest audiences when they relate to contemporary issues. As our county bicentennial approached, a local video company researched and produced a series of films on local history. The first film took a purely descriptive approach, identifying major historical events organized along a linear timeline. But subsequent films developed a historical narrative in relation to current community concerns. For example, the film on education provided a historical context for issues such as school funding, curriculum, and building consolidation. People took interest, not because few could recall the days of one-room schools, but because history informed their current lives as individuals and as a community.

The urge to preserve history before it's gone can also skew our interest solely toward the oldest members of a community or group. Retired workers, church elders, and long-term residents certainly provide rich information and valuable perspectives on the past. But history extends to the present moment, and its subjects include the young as well as the old. If we ignore today's youth, we lose that stage of life and its distinctive worldview from the historical record or receive it only indirectly through hindsight.

### *The Interpretive Approach*

The second model for doing oral history, the interpretive approach, builds on the descriptive, interpreting the character and significance of what is being documented. Interpretation is the essence of any humanities project. In the broadest sense, interpretive projects explore meaning within the human condition. It's easy to see that we can benefit from understanding, with interpretation, what life was like for soldiers in Iraq or the Korean War. But we can also find value in the everyday experiences of family farmers or office workers or churchgoers. Simply

put, interpretive projects fashion the material they collect to answer the question: Why does this matter?

We can capture the difference between these models by considering two hypothetical captions to a photograph included in an exhibit. The picture shows a woman standing at a table, operating a machine. A descriptive caption might read: “Catherine Brown, at her home operating a Verso grinder to prepare canned tomatoes, ca. 1999.” There’s good descriptive detail here, and the information clearly locates the photograph in space and time. A more interpretive caption might also include this sentence: “In the years before convenience foods, many women preserved fresh local foods to feed their families through the winter months.” We might have reached this conclusion from interviews with Brown and her contemporaries. This sentence uses the photograph to raise broader issues worth considering—our changing food habits, the evolution of women’s roles, and the impact of new technologies and economies in our lives.

Publicly, interpretive projects aim less to answer that question than to generate a dialogue about it. In the local black history exhibit, stories we had collected made it clear that we would have to include some commentary about racism in our community. Interestingly, black residents differed on the extent to which racism existed in the county. Those who lived here before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s spoke readily about their experience of racial discrimination, and they expressed different responses to it. Younger residents and those who settled in the area after 1970 had a different set of life experiences, of course. So interpretively, the questions to explore were: Is racism a part of our community? In what ways? We chose to include comments reflecting diverse experiences, something that stimulated public discussion about this important issue among blacks and across the community.

### *The Civic Approach*

The third model uses oral history to facilitate civic action. Of course, generating public dialogue is essential to this goal; it constitutes the consciousness-raising that lays the groundwork for any social movement. But what distinguishes civic oral history projects is not their revolutionary zeal but their close connection to a civic goal of the sort that emerges in town hall gatherings, city planning discussions, and group meetings. Oral history projects can promote culinary or historic tourism, assist on a historic building restoration effort, or contribute to the continuation of a local craft skill that has economic value and helps define the community.

Oral history projects may be *documentary*, *interpretive*, or *civic* in character. Documentary projects preserve and present information about a topic. An interpretive project emphasizes the meaning and significance of what is being collected. Civic oral history projects advance an expressed community goal.

Civic projects can also address social problems. When urban sprawl brought increasing numbers of new residents to central Ohio, a new conversation emerged about the nature of the community. Long-standing residents didn’t consider the recent arrivals real Knox Countians because they didn’t know the history of the area as did those born and raised here. For their part, newcomers often found the local folks rather standoffish. The division that developed



along this line began to manifest itself in public debates about such issues as taxes, educational reforms, and land preservation.

My fieldwork students and I had read a wonderful book, *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places*, by anthropologist Janet Fitchen, about changing life in rural upstate New York. Having encountered the same tensions in her fieldwork, she suggested that a common symbol might serve as the vehicle to unite community factions. The Kokosing River, which begins in and winds throughout Knox County, had just been designated an Ohio State Scenic River; there was a lot of buzz about that. Schools, businesses, and clubs take the Kokosing as their name, and nearly everyone relates to the river in some way. School classes make trips there, artists paint there, towns and villages line its banks, farmers plant in its fertile bottomland, and most of us drink its water.

We decided to select thirteen sites along the river that captured different moments of the region's history—the site of an early gristmill, a six-generation farm, a campground and canoe livery, and Kenyon's new environmental center, for example. At each site, we collected stories from those connected to it—young and old, natives and newcomers. We released *Life along the Kokosing* as a booklet with pictures and narrative about each location and an accompanying compact disc containing excerpts from our interviews about each site. The booklet included a map so people could literally travel the route or take an imaginative tour from the comfort of their living room.

Local radio stations played the series, and we think it did prove to be a useful learning tool for some residents. But it achieved unexpected impact when civic groups and organizations quickly took it up for promotional uses. Mount Vernon's downtown visitors bureau distributed the booklet to promote tourism and to introduce the community to prospective businesses that might develop here. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources promoted it in their publications to enhance appreciation for river corridors. Kenyon's environmental center employed it to develop public understanding about the connections between the natural and social environment.

Why do oral history? The work you do can be used for many different purposes. Understanding your broad purpose will enable you to conduct a project that ultimately serves your goals.

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As we have seen, oral history projects can have many purposes—to document, to interpret, to contribute to civic action. These can all be part of a single project, or they can arise at various stages of a project. To illustrate this, I want to explore a multi-faceted initiative that has been going on for nearly fifteen years called Food for Thought. Today, Food for Thought involves a countywide effort to build a dependable local market for foods produced in the area. But its roots lie in an oral history project that continues to inform community action.

In 1993 I launched a three-year oral history project to document and interpret family farming and its connection to rural life in Knox County. As someone with a long-standing interest in the community surrounding Kenyon College, I recognized that agriculture figured centrally in all

aspects of this area's life. Most academic work about agriculture at that time, which emanated from agriculture schools at land-grant universities, limited its view to unraveling farm economics and finding technological solutions to current agricultural problems. These were important issues, but we also wanted to understand how farmers felt about the land, the ways in which farming shaped social relationships, and the values that prevailed in an agricultural community. We wanted, in short, to put the culture back in agriculture, to investigate not only farming but also the very meaning of community.

My students began by reading about local farm life in the daily newspaper and in historical documents and by visiting feed mills, implement dealerships, and livestock auctions. In the process we met several farmers and visited their farms. Around Thanksgiving we invited several farm families to the campus for a Sunday dinner, followed by an informal conversation about farm life.

These family farmers articulated that they felt underappreciated and misunderstood. Even in a rural community, they observed, few residents were still directly involved with agriculture. As a result, even their own neighbors often understood little about the hard work involved in producing the nation's food supply or the serious challenges facing small-scale farming. The farmers were very proud of their family farming traditions, some of which extended back six generations on the same plot of land, and they wanted people to know their story. But the strong sense of independence that attracts many people to farming meant it was unlikely that the farmers would enter the public arena on their own initiative.



Students from the Rural Life Center at Kenyon College interview an extension agent for a project on family farming in Knox County, Ohio. Such projects not only give students experience in research, interviewing, and presentation but also help them understand the economics and culture of rural communities. *Courtesy of the Rural Life Center, Kenyon College*

The Family Farm Project thus developed both to document family farming and to stimulate public dialogue about farming and its relationship to community life. At the center of our work was the collection of dozens of interviews with farm families and others tied to agriculture. From this rich material we fashioned a variety of public projects, including a radio series, a Web site, a school curriculum, and countless public discussions and presentations.

Sometimes, intervening current events can transform oral history. As the Family Farm Project gained momentum, local civic leaders began to voice growing concern over the urban sprawl that was increasingly evident on the landscape. Suburban-style subdivisions were replacing cornfields, bringing increased traffic, the loss of green space, and the loss of intimacy in social relationships. Community focus groups emerged to engage issues of preservation and how to constructively guide growth. Fortuitously, residents started a broad discussion of the community just as the Family Farm Project was creating a public dialogue about the significance of agriculture in local rural life.

Out of these discussions emerged a county long-range plan that established community priorities and identified concrete initiatives to achieve desired ends. Knox Countians asserted as their top priority their wish to preserve the region's rural character. Drawing heavily on the work of the Family Farm Project, the resulting plan identified the preservation of family farming as central to achieving this goal. A college-based oral history project now informed a civic project to preserve and enhance the community.

The question now was *how* to preserve family farming. We knew from our many interviews that farmers felt a strong connection to the land—to making things grow and to the deep family roots. Their children wanted to stay close to agriculture; those who couldn't take over the family farm went to college to become large-animal veterinarians or learn computer technology they could use to assist farm operations. In most cases, farmers sold out to developers because they could no longer make an economic go of it in an increasingly centralized global market.

Working from our research, the Rural Life Center proposed several initiatives to build a local market for foods produced by area farmers, to be incorporated into the county's long-range plan: (1) publish a guide to local food products, enabling consumers to buy directly from farmers; (2) start a farmers' market in Mount Vernon's Public Square, creating an occasion for rural sociability and increasing economic activity in the business district, which was under stress from the rise of chain restaurants and big-box stores; and (3) encourage restaurants and other institutional food buyers to buy locally.



Members of the Hathaway family of Fredericktown, Ohio, pose with their John Deere tractor. The photograph, used in a project on family farming, reinforced stories from interviewees about the role of family and community relationships in small-scale farming in central Ohio. *Courtesy of Gregory P. Spaid*

All these efforts involved complex social engineering that goes beyond the subject of this volume. What is relevant here is the continuing role of oral history projects in all this work. The guide to local food products, called *HomeGrown*, included an essay on the history of local agriculture drawn from our interviews and related research. To promote the newly created farmers' market, we launched an oral history project to explore the significance of food in area residents' lives. *Foodways* included a series of essays, biographical sketches, and recipes, published in the newspaper in conjunction with the farmers' market, on topics including hunting and trapping, ritual foods, dining out, and feeding the hungry. We next mounted a traveling exhibit titled *Where Does Our Food Come From?* that explored the local food system from farm to table, based on fieldwork with farmers, processors, truck drivers, and chefs. The exhibit traveled to community fairs throughout Knox County and to statewide agricultural conventions.

These and other projects contributed to the goal of building a sustainable local food system by providing food for thought (hence the name of the project). For a generation, most

consumers have taken the sources of their food for granted, making their food selections primarily on the basis of cost and convenience. If we are to build a local food system, consumers must think differently about the food they eat. They will have to appreciate how their food choices affect them as individuals and as a community. To these ends, oral history enables people to learn about food, farming, and their community in ways that translate directly to the decisions they make in their everyday lives.

#### THINKING AHEAD

Having a good sense of what motivates everyone involved and the goals you hope to achieve can orient the project as you confront particular issues and challenges. At the same time, you'll likely find yourself revisiting these questions at various points in light of new experiences, thus reshaping your original vision of the project. Complex, collaborative projects are dynamic in nature; starting out prepared, by considering these questions, will enable you to be thoughtful and flexible, assuring a successful, rewarding result for all involved.