

**MISSISSIPPI ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**STANDARDS FOR COLLECTION AND  
PRESERVATION OF ORAL HISTORY AUDIO TAPES**

The following recommendations are intended to enable the project to

- produce high quality, consistent, authentic, and useful audio tape interviews worthy of long-term preservation;
- process, store, and utilize these materials so as to ensure maximum usability and long-term viability of the audio recordings and the information they contain.

**Equipment:** High quality, clean equipment and tapes are essential to the project. Carefully selecting one brand or model and using these throughout the project will help produce and maintain consistent sound for all interviews. *Equipment and tapes will be supplied for pilot project sites.*

**Cassette tapes:** Use a high-bias, type-II cassette made by a major manufacturer (e.g. Sony or Maxell). It is recommended that the project use sixty-minute cassettes for all interviews, even though many interviews may last more than 60 minutes. The project will have to balance considerations of preservation vs. convenience. *Tapes will be supplied for pilot sites.*

**Microphones:** Use the best microphone made by a major manufacturer (e.g. Panasonic or Sony) that the project can afford. A unidirectional (records only sound directly in front of it), clip-on (or lavalier) microphone works well if you are interviewing one individual and may make the interviewee less self-conscious. A table microphone may be used. *Equipment will be supplied for pilot project sites.*

**Power sources:** Battery-operated recorders are often preferred. Since they are less subject to the problems of local electrical systems. When using these, make sure that the interviewer has two complete sets of unopened, new batteries. If not using a portable recorder, each interviewer will need an extension cord and three-pronged adapter, so that the location of the recorder is not limited by the location of an electrical outlet.

**Headphones:** It is handy to have an inexpensive pair of "walkman" type headphones to occasionally monitor the recording equipment during the interview. For processing and reference activities, more durable headphones are preferable. For health reasons it may be advisable that each staff member have a set of headphones.

**Equipment cleaning and maintenance:** Well maintained, clean equipment is essential. Develop regular procedures for equipment cleaning and maintenance, and keep a log of all repair, cleaning and other maintenance. Thoroughly clean and test all equipment before it goes on the road.

To clean playback equipment, use either a commercial head cleaner (available from audio supply houses) or 99% isopropyl alcohol (from a chemical supply house, not a drugstore), and swabs or lint-free tissues. Periodically de-magnetize each tape player, using a good quality de-magnetizer. (Some low cost de-magnetizers don't have enough power to thoroughly de-magnetize tape heads.) Do not use de-magnetizer near recorded tapes or computers.

### **Preparing for and Conducting an Interview**

**Training and Documentation:** Thoroughly train every interviewer in correct tape-handling procedures and in equipment operation, testing, and maintenance. Have interviewers conduct several mock or practice interviews in different locations, so that they will become proficient at trouble-shooting, adjusting equipment, and selecting an optimum interview site.

Provide a notebook for each interviewer. Include in it a complete set of equipment operating instructions, a checklist of solutions for common problems, and copies of all other project forms and written information.

**Choosing the site:** Conduct the interview in a quiet location, without distracting background noise where the interviewee is comfortable and at ease. Generally, a room with soft surfaces (fabrics, draperies, upholstery) produces a better quality sound than one with hard surfaces (glass or painted walls, metal furniture). Turn off televisions, radios, stereos, and noise heating or air conditioning systems. Sit away from windows if there is heavy traffic outside. The best sound will be produced when the interviewer sits directly in front of the interviewee, not to one side.

**Testing equipment:** Before beginning the interview and following equipment instructions, record a brief conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, to test the recording level. The recording level should be kept around the "peak" or ideal level. (If the recorded signal stays above the ideal or peak level, the sound will be distorted. Conversely, if the recorded signal is consistently too low, there will be background noise or a tape hiss.) It is also helpful for the interviewee and interviewer to listen to the conversation, so that they'll know how they're actually going to sound on the tape. After completing the recording, punch the tabs on top of the cassette so that the tape cannot be erased. *The interviewer should report any malfunctions to the project director immediately to prevent future problems.*

**Periodic equipment checks:** Each time a new tape is inserted or the recorder is turned on, check to make sure that all is functioning properly. Periodically during the interview, check the recording level; it may need slight adjusting.

**Contextual information:** Establish basic contextual identification that each interviewer will provide at the beginning of every interview, such as date, location of the interview, names of interviewer and interviewee). The interviewer shall record this information on

paper before or at the very beginning of the interview. Every interviewee will sign a standard release form provided by the University of Southern Mississippi Oral History program at the beginning of each interview; interviews will not be completed without a signed agreement. If a photograph is made of the interviewee, he or she must sign a release for use of the photo as well.

Pending continued funding, taped interviews will be professionally transcribed by the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. Once interviews are transcribed, each interviewee will receive a copy of the transcription for review and approval. Interviewees should understand well ahead of time that the University of Southern Mississippi will be the official repository of original tapes, that a copy will be available locally at the site designated by the sponsoring organization, and that each interviewee will receive at no cost one copy of his or her taped interview, or, pending continued funding for transcription, one copy of a transcript of the interview. Additional copies will be available for a modest fee. The official repository will also make interviews available in transcript or audio format to interested scholars and researchers and for such public programming as the Center may deem appropriate in keeping with the educational goals and mission of the Center.

**Cassette labeling:** Interviewers will label each side of every cassette, using labels provided by the project and completing all necessary information.

### **Processing and Storage**

**Training and Documentation:** Thoroughly train all staff in correct tape handling procedures and in equipment operation, testing, and maintenance. Keep a complete set of equipment operating and cleaning instructions handy at all times.

**Handling:** Wear gloves whenever handling tape recordings; fingerprints can damage both the tape and the recorded signal.

**Dubbing:** When first received, make at least three copies of every interview:

1) **Master or preservation copy:** If the project is seriously concerned about the long-term preservation of the audio recording itself, make a reel-to-reel preservation or master copy. Audio cassettes, a relatively inexpensive, short-lived format, are not recommended for long-term storage of historical information. However, if the project's primary concern is to preserve the information or substance of the interviews (vs. the recorded interview) and all interviews are thoroughly transcribed, a cassette copy will suffice as the preservation or security master.

2) **Use Copy:** This will be given to the transcriber and then to researchers for use. If high use is expected, several such copies might initially be made.

3) **Service Copy:** Staff will use this copy to make future duplicates (for off-

site users, future use copies, etc.).

When dubbing cassettes, always dub to the same size (e.g. 60 minute cassette dubbed to 60 minute cassette).

**Records and Information Protocols:** Keep accurate records about the creation and processing of every interview, all dubs that are made, and all editing, splicing, or other changes. Clearly indicate the names of both the interviewer and interviewee on the cassette, abstract, and transcript. Describe on the cassette label and in appropriate catalog records the recording speed, level, and length of the interview. Also indicate on each cassette the date it was recorded.

**Description and Finding Aids:** Create at least an abstract and preferably a verbatim transcript of every interview. This will reduce wear and tear on the tape. Carefully proof each transcription, by reading it word-for-word while listening to the tape. Return the transcription to the interviewee for his or her review.

**Storage:** Store cassettes vertically, in inert polypropylene boxes with protective hubs that hold cassettes in place. Store the original master in a different location (preferable different building) from the use and service copies. Storage areas should be clean, dry, and have a non-fluctuating, moderate temperature (65-70 degrees) and stable relative humidity of 40-50%. Keep all cassettes away from likely exposure to magnetic and electromagnetic fields (e.g. appliance motors and electromagnetic bookends).

### **Reference and Research Use**

Provide clean, white gloves for researchers to wear when handling cassettes.

Never make the original cassette available for research use.

Use the best quality playback equipment available, making certain that it is regularly inspected, cleaned, maintained, and calibrated. Keep a log of all repair and cleaning performed.

Thoroughly train all reference staff in the operation of equipment. Have simple clearly worded instructions readily available near all equipment for use by researchers and staff. Also have a good supply of extra ear pads available, for health reasons.

Trained staff should make all requested copies of cassettes for researches. All copies made for external distribution should be appropriately labeled and have copyright restrictions clearly noted.

### **Long-Term Preservation**

The long-term preservation of the project's audio recordings largely will depend upon the

commitment and capability of an archival repository to provide knowledgeable staff and sufficient resources to inspect and re-record the recordings throughout the years to come. Today's reel-to-reel, polyester tapes carry only a ten-year warranty. Although there is no published data about the life expectancy of audio cassettes, one authority states that "some archivists feel that any cassette over two years old is suspect. . . .Audio cassettes contain exceptionally thin and narrow tape with causes them to be more susceptible to damage and failure than reel-to-reel tape (and to be) particularly prone to damage during playback." (Paton "Audio Re-recording," *American Archivist* [1996] p. 196).

Thus all cassette and reel-to-reel recordings will need to be regularly and periodically inspected, evaluated, and re-recorded. Use and service cassettes that are heavily used will have to be frequently replaced. The master cassettes also must be evaluated, in order to assess the need for a fresh re-recording. Over the long haul, preservation re-recording is an expensive process, requiring highly trained technical staff and costly equipment. As Paton further noted, "if there is no inherent reason to maintain the recording in audio form, it may be more economical in the long run to invest time and money in producing good transcriptions, rather than continue to reformat the recordings generation after generation."

### Sources

Willa K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (ALTMR, 1995).

"The Care and Handling of Tape," 7-minute video produced by AMPEX and distributed through the National Media Laboratory.

Oral History Association, *Guidelines and Principles of the Oral History Association*, pamphlet no. 3 (1992).

Oral History Association, *Oral History and the Law*. Rev. Ed., 1992.

Christopher Ann Paton, "Preservation Re-recording of Audio Recordings in Archives: Problems, Priorities, Technologies, and Recommendations," *American Archivist* 61 (spring 1998): 188-219; includes list of sources for audio supplies.

Frederick J. Stielow, *The Management of oral History Sound Archives* (Greenwood, 1986).

Alan Ward, *A Manual of Sound Archive Administration* (Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishing, 1990).

**These standards were developed for The Mississippi Oral History Program by a Standards Committee. Committee members were Dr. Charles Bolton, Director to The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at The University of Southern Mississippi; Dr. Barbara Carpenter, Executive Director of The Mississippi Humanities**

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**All oral history projects supported by The Mississippi Humanities Council will adhere to these standards unless specific written permission is given by the Executive Director to do otherwise.**