

## GUIDELINES FOR DOING ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS FOR THE LA&M

Doing an interview as an Oral History for the LA&M is not difficult if you are the kind of person who finds other people's lives and experiences interesting. This interest is very important. It is what will guide you to ask questions and pursue information. If you also have an active interest in the history of the leather lifestyles, your curiosity will lead you to ask the *right* questions and pursue the information most likely to be of interest to future researchers.

To follow are some guidelines for the entire process, from preparing yourself and your equipment, to conducting the interview and delivering it to the LA&M. In these guidelines, the word "subject" refers to the person being interviewed.



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## Leather Archives & Museum

# Oral History Project



## General Recommendations (Rules) For Doing An Interview

1. Record your interview on a standard-size audio cassette using mid-level or high grade tape at standard speed.
2. Label your tapes before you meet with the interview subject. Always start with at least two labeled cassettes. If one fails, you still have another. If the interview goes on beyond the length of a single tape (and most will) you are prepared for that.
3. Include on the label the subject's name, the date and the place where the interview will take place. For example: Rick Storer, 23 Oct. 2008, his home, Chicago.
4. Unless your subject especially requests it, or an avoidable circumstance demands it, do not continue to interview a person who has become tired or irritated with the process. Instead, set a date to come back another time to continue the interview, bringing with you a very brief outline of what has already been discussed and a detailed reminder of the final minutes of the previous interview.
5. Pretest your equipment, being sure the batteries in your tape recorder are up to the task or that you have the correct adapter for AC, etc.
6. If you are re-using cassettes, erase or degauss them ahead of time.
7. Arrive promptly at the appointment, calling ahead if possible to confirm that the subject remembers you are coming and has set aside time enough for a free and, one hopes, undisturbed interview.



## Preparing Yourself to do an Oral History Interview for the LA&M

1. Know what is generally known about your subject, and as much more as possible. For example: You know that Joseph Bean is an editor, has recently moved to Chicago to work at the LA&M. Check books in print or, on-line, Amazon.com for books he may have written or edited; ask other editors you know or others involved with the Leather Archives what they think is interesting about Joseph, what they would ask; ask people who don't necessarily know Joseph what they think of his books or his reputation or whatever else you may have to ask about. In short, come with as clear an idea as possible of what the likely areas of discussion and controversy and interest will be.
2. Plan to dress and present yourself in a way that will facilitate communications and not inflame controversy with the subject. For example: If you discover that Joseph has had an on-going problem with The 15 Association (which he has not), don't choose to wear a patch or button with the logo of The 15 on it. This does not mean you should lie about yourself or your connections. What's more, you can not hope to always cover all the bases in this area, but it is worth thinking of. On the positive side, if you have a friendship pin from a club Joseph belongs to, it won't hurt to wear it, and even to intentionally mention you have done so especially for the interview.
3. Clear your own schedule so that you can begin the interview relaxed and with no pressing need for food or bathroom facilities.
4. Carry everything you need in a single bag or briefcase, carefully packed, so you can set up and be ready to start very quickly, but also be prepared to set up and then give the subject time to warm up to you before beginning the actual interview. Note: If possible, start the tape before or early in even the "idle" conversation that takes place before the interview. This give the person a chance to become accustomed to the tape player (learn to ignore it) and it collects any gems that might be lost when you later say, "When we were talking you said..." Only to discover that the subject can't quite figure that our now or say it half as well as he did in relaxed conversation.

## After You Do an Oral History Interview for the LA&M

- Be sure that all tapes are adequately labeled, including sequential numbering of the sides of all cassettes.
- Be sure that the tapes are properly recorded by playing bits at the beginning and end of each side of each tape.
- For safety, make duplicates of the tapes if it can conveniently be done.
- Send the tapes to Rick Storer, Leather Archives and Museum, 6418 N. Greenview Ave., Chicago, IL 60626, as soon as possible, along with a note saying whether you have collected anything that is not in the package with the tapes and whether you have or have not already made safety duplicates of the tapes.
- Your tapes will be transcribed at the Leather Archives, and both the tapes and the transcript will be filed. Your name as spoken in the sound-check label will appear on the cover sheet of the transcript and in the actual transcription of the beginning of the tape unless you direct us otherwise.

## Conducting an Oral History Interview for the LA&M

1. Speak your label onto the first side of the first cassette as the sound check for your equipment. For Example: This is John Doe, interviewing Joseph Bean at his North Clark Street home in Chicago on October 23, 1997. And, add to your sound-check the following, as nearly as you can recall it: "This interview is for the LA&M's Oral History Records which will be made available to researchers, writers and scholars." Then be sure to get the subject to indicate that he or she heard that statement by asking something like, "You knew that, didn't you?" or "You understand that people using the archives will have access to this interview, don't you?" If the subject wants to discuss the question of people having access to the information in the interview, allow him or her to make any reasonable limiting statement. Maybe he/she will say that no one is to use his name in his lifetime or that anyone wishing to publish information from the interview should be required to check with him/her in advance if the name is to be used, etc. Permit the statement to stand as it is given and trust the administration of the LA&M to secure a less limited access at a later time or to abide by the subject's wishes.
2. Start with a few simple questions that can be answered briefly. Ask the subject, for example, where he or she was born; how long the family stayed there; etc. gives a chance to collect useful information in small bites while you and the subject relax with each other.
3. Keep the conversation rolling. If it bogs down, it is often because the subject has lost his train of thought or is uncomfortable with the information being shared. You might want to keep just one-word notes, a running list, so you can bring the subject back to the matter under discussion or to an earlier subject that may be more comfortable and worthy of more exploration. This backing-up process often leads the subject into the uncomfortable matter at a new and more comfortable angle.
4. Remember that the interest of anyone who finds an Oral History in the files of the LA&M will be primarily interested in answers concerning the subject's leather life, but that his biography in general may have tremendous bearing on the leather-related details. So, get a general biography in brief early in the conversation. You might, for example, ask, "Can you tell me the Joseph Bean story in 100 words or less?" Ask additional questions as necessary to get a life line that places the subject in time and geography as well as social circumstances. Things like the wealth or poverty of the subject and his or her family, rural or urban childhood, mobile or stationary living situations, degree of education and major interests in school, happy or unpleasant childhood may be of great importance.
5. Be sure to ask, in some form, for the following information:
  - a.) Early sexual experiences and fantasies.
  - b.) Coming out story, using the term broadly, to include both coming out as gay, if the subject is gay or lesbian and coming out, to whatever degree, as kinky or into radical sex.
  - c.) What the leather/SM world he or she first encountered was like, where and when, and how it changed in his or her time in the milieu.
  - d.) Involvement with leather/SM clubs, businesses or organizations.
  - e.) Any involvement with leather/SM or gay/lesbian activism, civil rights, etc.
  - f.) Sexual evolution and continuity. (Many people have been involved in leathersex during periods of their lives, but not continuously throughout their lives, and the periods in and out of leather activity could be important factors in how they see and interact with the leather communities.)
  - g.) Degree to which the subject has been open about, secretive about or hurt/limited by his sexuality and sexual tastes.
6. It is good to have your Oral History interview include a clear picture of the person as he or she would be seen in a TV or newspaper feature. That is, include the kinds of identifying information that would appear in a report of the subject, say, winning a race: Joe Blow, a 44 year old decorator, new to the New York area, who has also worked as a landscape architect and waiter, won the marathon today.
7. It is very important to get opinions as well as facts. If, for example, the subject says, "It's easier to learn SM techniques now than it was back then?" Ask, "Do you think that's good? Or, was the old way better?" If he or she says, "Clubs were different then (or there)." Ask, "Are they better now (here)?" Follow-up questions, in general, show the subject that you are finding what he or she says interesting. And, no less important, they collect more detailed information *and* personalize the information.
8. All along, allow your interest in what is being said to guide you in asking questions. Show your enthusiasm for the subject and his or her memories. Use follow-up questions to expand on the information volunteered, but let the subject also choose not to say more when he or she wants to drop a topic or turn to a new one.
9. Express as little of your own opinion as possible and as much agreement with the subject as you honestly feel. Your opinions, once introduced, will color what the subject says, even if he or she is already familiar with you and your ideas.
10. When the interview seems to be coming to an end, give the subject an opportunity to speak of whatever he or she wants to by asking something like, "Is there anything you would like to talk about that we haven't touched on today? Anything you'd like to say more about?"
11. Be grateful and show your appreciation. Many of the subjects from whom the LA&M would like to have Oral Histories are people who have been interviewed many times. Making time for you to interview them for the LA&M does them no particular good, so their greatest reward for taking the time and making the effort is likely to be your expression of thanks or appreciation.
12. Give your subject the opportunity (without the slightest pressure) to donate artifacts or papers to the LA&M, and leave LA&M brochures with him or her.
13. Ask the subject for recommendations about other Oral History interview subjects.