



A Web of Oral History

Sue Lisk looks at online collections of oral histories and why they can be valuable to family historians

ISOMETIMES HEAR CUCKOO CLOCKS, CHAIRS BEING PULLED ACROSS THE floor, or construction work, in the background. I note when someone laughs or gets excited. Sometimes it even changes the meaning of what is said.

I'm transcribing interviews from an oral history project conducted in the 1970s in a small town in Quebec. The interviewees were elderly at the time, so some of the memories date back to the early 1900s. I feel fortunate to be involved, to have been allowed to pull back the curtain of time and become a virtual member of the community.

Oral histories are scattered across the internet, within a click of fascinating any family historian who wishes to investigate a particular topic, place, or time period. I'd like to share some examples of the types of treasures within easy reach.

The Holocaust

Not all oral histories are pleasant to listen to. But maybe that makes them even more important for us to hear.



Cavern at the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach, designed by architect Kenneth Treister, and completed in 1990, Carol M. Highsmith. (Library of Congress)

The St. Louis Center for Holocaust Studies, now known as the St. Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum, was one of the first oral history projects devoted to the Holocaust. Its aim was to interview Holocaust survivors, witnesses, liberators and others who had some connection to this dark chapter of our past. The collection of interviews is available at <https://stlholocaustmuseum.org/survivor-stories/oral-histories>.

Viewers can explore the site in three ways: by nationality, by location, and by experience. The project incorporates interviews with people representing eighteen different nationalities. The locations include various cities, states, regions and countries, as well as numerous concentration camps, internment camps, displaced persons camps, labor camps and ghettos. The experiences range from aiding Jewish refugees to attending Nazi rallies to living in ghettos, from surviving concentration camps to losing family members in the Holocaust to posing as non-Jewish persons. You'll find dozens of other types of experiences here, too.

Take interviewee, Irene Baron, a German woman who escaped the Holocaust and was sent to an internment camp. If you hover over the block devoted to her story, you'll be taken to a page with a few short phrases summarizing her