

House History Comes Alive



RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL: Grades 7 to 12



OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the Web site for the U.S. House of Representatives Oral History Program, <http://oralhistory.clerk.house.gov>. Students have the opportunity to learn more about the House of Representatives through the firsthand recollections of longtime employees, Pages, eyewitnesses to historic events, and family of former Members intimately connected to the institution. Students are encouraged to analyze the role staff played in shaping the institution, as well as the ways in which these oral histories add to the historical record.



CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. history, American government, social studies, African-American history, women's history, social history, oral history
- Great Depression, Prohibition, New Deal, World War II, Cold War, civil rights, impeachment, Watergate, women's rights movement, technology



OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to discuss the ways in which oral history can complement and add to the historical record.
2. Students should be able to discuss the possible shortcomings and pitfalls of relying solely upon oral histories when studying the past.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends concerning the U.S. House from 1930 to 1990.
4. Students should be able to explain the significant role that staff has played in the day-to-day operations of the institution and in shaping the identity of the House of Representatives.



LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
 - a. What is oral history?
 - b. What are the potential benefits of conducting oral histories?
 - c. What are some of the possible limitations of oral histories?
 - d. How might oral histories help people learn more about a large and complex institution like the House of Representatives?
2. Ask students to review the Web site for the U.S. House of Representatives Oral History Program either independently or in groups. Encourage students to take notes and to write down any questions they encounter while looking at the Web site.

3. On blank index cards, write the following term, event, name, or year:
 - a. 1954
 - b. Cloakroom
 - c. Speaker's Lobby
 - d. State of the Union address
 - e. Roll call
 - f. Newspapers
 - g. Broadcasting
 - h. Jeannette Rankin
 - i. President Gerald Ford
 - j. House Leadership
 - k. Playground

Note that each card should be unique—there should be no repetition of terms.

4. If not already done, divide students into small groups. Distribute one index card to each group.
5. Instruct students that they should choose an oral history which they believe best corresponds to the term, event, name, or year on their respective index card. In order to make this decision they should divide up the biographies featured on the Web site, listen to the audio clips, and watch the video clips for clues on which person best fits with what is written on the group's index card. Remind students that some interviewees could fit in more than one category so it is up to them to make a convincing argument to defend their choice. Once students have decided on an oral history, have them read the interview transcript(s). Students also should listen to the audio clips and where applicable watch the video clips for the oral history they chose. Lastly, have students complete the "Oral History Analysis" worksheet located on page 4.
6. Have students complete the Main Exercise.
7. Time permitting, conduct the optional extended activity.



MAIN ACTIVITY

You have been asked to summarize one of the oral histories featured on the U.S. House of Representatives Oral History Program Web site. A five-minute block of time has been cleared for you and your classmates to make a presentation to your Representative in Congress concerning your oral history analysis and recap. Use the Web site, your completed "Oral History Analysis" worksheet, and your creativity to design a presentation which will convince your Representative to introduce a bill which would fund an oral history program in your local town or city. To locate the name of your Representative go to, <http://www.house.gov/>.



SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITY

Congratulations! You and your team convinced your Representative to back the oral history initiative. It subsequently passed Congress and you are now the team leaders of the project. The legislation has few restrictions but does indicate that you only can conduct interviews with former employees of the local, state, or federal government. In addition, the potential interviewees must have a connection to your town or city (current or former resident; attended local schools; represented the local school board, town or city government, or congressional district which encompasses your town or city). Make a list of your three top candidates and conduct either an audio or video interview with these people. Before conducting any interviews, consult an oral historian in your area and use the oral history resources listed on page 3 for direction on how to:

- Conduct background research
- Record and transcribe interviews
- Obtain a deed of gift
- Confer with interviewees during the oral history process
- Deposit in a local library or research institution



ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES

“Oral History Evaluation Guidelines” of the Oral History Association:

http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub_eg.html#Principles%20and%20Standards

Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)

Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlin, *Oral History Manual* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2002)

Oral History Association

The national organization for oral historians which seeks to bring together all persons interested in oral history as a way of collecting and interpreting human memories to foster knowledge and human dignity.

<http://www.oralhistory.org/>

Michigan Oral History Association

<http://www.michiganoha.org/>

Midwest Oral History Group

<http://oralhistory.ning.com/>

New England Association of Oral History

<http://www.oralhistory.uconn.edu/neaoh.html>

Northwest Oral History Association

<http://www.his.state.mt.us/finduse/noha.asp>

Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region

<http://www.ohmar.org/>

Southwest Oral History Association

<http://www.southwestoralhistory.org/>

Texas Oral History Association

<http://www.baylor.edu/toha/>

