

# Julia Brock Transcript

*It's important to remember these stories because the way that textbooks and other history books are written often don't include ordinary people, the ordinary people who make history happen. So, when we sit down with someone from our community, we are preserving an eyewitness account that otherwise would be lost.*

**That's Julia Brock, public historian at the University of Alabama**

**Public history is also called oral history, stories told about history, not written about history.**

**At least not written until you record them and transcribe them, and then because of you,**

**those stories will be around for a long time to come.**

**When we learn how to gather oral history, we learn how to do a good interview.**

**It takes three things to do a good interview.**

**You have to know something about the subject.**

**You have to be genuinely curious,  
and you have to be a good listener.**

**For example, if you have a list of prepared questions, and the person you're interviewing goes off in a direction you might not have been expecting, you need to be a good listener and follow up on that.**

**Like asking, "what do you mean by that?" Or "tell me more about that."**

**So, we'll begin with Julia by being "genuinely curious", so we asked her...**

**Dr. Brock, how did you get interested in history?**

I fell in love with historical landscapes first. So, my father would take me to historical sites. We were really close to the Chickamauga battlefield, for example, and you know, other sites. We were very close to a lot of important native history with Cherokee, New Echota, and Spisidrome. And I just became really entranced with the power of place, I guess you could say, and the way historical narratives have connected to the places around me.

And that's really how I got interested but didn't think it could become a career. But I stumbled into, as an undergraduate, a public history class and learned that you can be a historian outside of the classroom. And I became totally just electrified by that and just set my cap in that direction. So, yeah, here I am.

Oral history is important because it's a way of preserving important memories about the past that otherwise would be lost.

**Okay, so oral history is important. And we can do it.**

**You don't have to be a PhD historian to do it.**

**It matters to the future that we understand these stories.**

**So, what do we do next?**

So, we've talked about the importance of oral history, but now how do you begin the process of collecting oral history? Well, there are certain steps that you need to keep in mind. The first is finding someone to interview. Who are you going to interview? I would say start to think about what interests you. Are there certain periods of the past that interest you, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War era? The 1980s? The 1990s?

And then think about people who may have been alive then, who may have witnessed the particular past that you are interested in. Now to find someone, you can either ask family, you can ask friends, you can ask your schoolteachers, you can go to your church, you can go to your organizations that you're involved in like the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts and other organizations to find people who are willing to be interviewed. Now, it's really important to emphasize willing.

So, if you've already looked at the website and you've listened to the story of Ms. Olivia White, you know that she found many of the people to interview for the Bloody Tuesday project. So, if you find that person, if you find the Ms. Olivia in your community, they will help to connect you to other people who can be a part of your project.

**We need to learn how to get written permission from someone to tell their story.**

One of the most important aspects of oral history practice is to gain consent of the narrator you wish to interview. So, you need to make sure that they are willing to

talk with you, willing to share their memories, and you need to make sure they're okay with you recording their interview.

**We wondered; how do you gain their trust?**

Sometimes people are going to say no, and you just have to respect that they don't want to be interviewed. I think it's best to start with someone who knows your family or who knows that you're a part of the community in which they're a part of. And so that may open doors to you. But you do need to build rapport with that person.

So, spend time with them before the interview, sit down with them, learn a little bit about their life. That's also part of the research that you need to do before you conduct the interview, is just learn about their biography, do a little research into them, and by doing that, you'll also build rapport and build trust.

**Okay, let's say we found a subject we're interested in,  
and we have found someone who wants to tell us that story.**

**We've gained the trust of the person we're interviewing.**

**The next step is research.**

**Remember, you have to know something about the subject.**

**Not a lot, but something.**

**Remember that part we talked about earlier where we said to do a good interview, you need to be a good listener?**

**Well, Julia thinks that too.**

So, you have found the person that you would like to interview and they have consented to be interviewed and that's great. So, the next step that you need to take is to do the research and learn something about the subject so that you can conduct an informed interview. That means you need to consult library books. You need to consult other elders. You can do internet research to learn something about your subject. If you want to interview somebody about the Civil Rights Movement in your community, then you need to know something about the Civil Rights Movement. You don't have to become an expert on it, but you need to know something in order to ask informed questions.

**Remember that part we mentioned, about how being a good listener helps you ask good follow-up questions?**

You also need to become practiced in listening. Now, listening and hearing are two different skill sets. We go through our day, and we hear everything around us. But that doesn't mean we're listening closely to our teachers or our friends when we're in conversation. In an oral history interview, you've got to be a present listener, and by that, I mean you've got to stay focused on what your narrator is saying so that you can catch new pieces of information that you may want to follow up on, or you can listen to whether or not they're comfortable with the line of questioning that you're on, right? Maybe they need to take a break.

So, being present in the interview and doing some close listening is really important. So, I encourage you to practice your listening skills even before you go into the interview.

By close listening, if your narrator says something that surprises you or begins to tell you something that you didn't know about the particular subject, you can actually stop them and ask a follow-up question. "Tell me more what you mean about that." And it can lead the interview in a whole new and fruitful discussion.

**And there was a third thing that Julia said, but we screwed up the recording, so we're just going to tell you what she said.**

**We're being honest with you because that's what she said.**

**That's what she told us to do - be honest!**

**If you're scared of them, tell them. If you feel you made a mistake, tell them.**

**They're probably scared too, and you telling them the truth might help them lighten up.**

**Are you scared?**

**Just a little**

**Good. Me too.**

**And so, we found a subject that we care about.**

**We've done our research. We're genuinely interested.**

**So, what's next?**

So, you've done your research and now you're ready to sit down and come up with a list of questions for your narrator or interviewee to answer. I usually come up with a list of 10 to 15 questions that are open-ended, and by that, I mean questions that elicit a full response from your narrator. And the way that you know a question is open-ended is if it begins with the phrase, "please describe to me," or "please tell me."

Right? An open-ended question is the opposite of a closed-ended question. And a closed-ended question is one that just simply elicits a yes or no answer.

So, if I were to ask you, "Wow. It was really difficult living through the 1960s."

You know, that would just elicit a yes or no answer, right? Instead, you might say, "describe to me what it was like to live through the 1960s. Describe to me what it was like to serve in the Vietnam War, or the first Gulf War," et cetera, depending on your topic.

So, make sure your questions are as open-ended as possible. And then I would say connected to questions, it's important to share the questions in advance with your narrator so that they can prepare. The more preparation you allow them, the more thorough the interview will be, and the more they'll have a chance to really think about what they want to say in response to your questions.

**So now we're ready to go ahead with our interview,  
but there are details. And these details must be covered.**

**Where will we meet?**

**What date and time will we meet? What is a good location for audio?**

**Being on time is important,  
or even being early, it shows them that you care, and you gain their respect.**

So, you've done the research, you've come up with a great set of open-ended questions. Now it's time to schedule the interview. You want to think about a place that is comfortable for the narrator; that might be their home, it also could be in a church. It could be in a room in the public library.

But you want to think about a place that is quiet and relatively free of outside noise. You'd be so surprised how much noise can be caused by a barking dog, even if it's outside, or by the air conditioner rattling, or other kinds of sounds that come

into the recorder that might get in the way of you hearing or the recorder hearing what you or the interviewee is saying.

So, make sure the space is comfortable and quiet. Schedule the interview at a time that is convenient to your narrator. Make sure that you confirm that date and then you're ready to start thinking about your technology.

**The last thing you want when doing an interview is to discover your recorder didn't work properly.**

**We need to practice with our recorder and make sure that we're comfortable using it,**

**and we also need to make sure the person we're interviewing feels comfortable.**

Remember that it's still important to build rapport with your narrator, and you want to make sure they're comfortable in the interview setting.

Some people are nervous when you turn on a recorder, and so before you do that, make sure that you just spend time talking with them. Ask them how their day went. Ask them to remind you of certain aspects of their life. Talk about their family. Make sure that they're comfortable with all the questions that you want to go over and ask them if there's anything maybe they don't want to talk about so you can know that in advance. So just spend a few times getting relaxed, getting settled in, and getting them prepared to open up as you turn on the recorder.

**You may be worried if you have the right recording device.**

**Don't worry. You do.**

**Most smartphones even come with a voice memo app.**

You may be concerned about what technology you need to record these interviews, but you should not be concerned because it's as simple as using your phone. Every modern smartphone, Android or iPhone, has a voice recorder app, a voice recorder memo app that you can use. There are also free apps that are made specifically for oral history that we're going to share with you on the website. So, there's lots that you can draw from using your phone. If you'd like, you can get an inexpensive microphone that you can use, but that's absolutely not necessary. Your phone is sufficient to do these interviews.

It's really important that you're comfortable with the recording technology that you're using. If it's your phone, it's going to be great because you know your phone so well, so you don't have to go get any new equipment that is unfamiliar to you. But even though your phone is familiar to you, it's important to practice using the apps that you will use to record the interview. Practice with your friends and family. You know, spend five minutes or so recording your friends in different kinds of sound environments in different rooms of the house so you know how the recorder picks up sound.

When you get to the interview, make sure that your phone is silenced, that it's on airplane mode, so it's not accepting any other calls or any sorts of pings or texts. Make sure that it is plugged in or that it's charged so the phone doesn't die in the middle of the recording.

And it's also okay to do some practice runs with your interviewee or your narrator. So, you know, even in the interview, five minutes into the interview, if you want to just pause the interview, look back and make sure that it's recorded everything that your narrator has said up to that point, that's fine, because you know what? That is better than getting to the end of the interview and realizing that you've got nothing, that you've lost the interview, which has happened to me. Use me as an example. Make sure that the technology is running as you want it to run. And so, it's important to practice.

**When we interview someone, we're not simply looking for information.**

**Emotion helps tell the story.**

**Emotion is a good thing. If somebody starts to get emotional, the best thing to do is shut up and listen.**

**Give them a chance to share their heart.**

One thing that I want to share with you is that sometimes when you're interviewing someone, even if they've consented to interview with you and they know all the questions that you want to ask in advance, sometimes you're talking about subjects that will represent some form of, you know, traumatic experience to someone, or at the very least just bring up strong emotions as they're remembering. And that's perfectly okay.

So, for example, in one of my first interviews as a student, I was interviewing someone about her experience as a Rosie the Riveter in World War II, and she was

recounting the death of her boyfriend abroad. Now, this had happened, you know, 60 years before I did the interview. But it brought back so much emotion for her that she began to weep in the interview. And so, it was really important for me at that moment to respect her emotions and to give her space. So I turned off the recorder. I offered to get her tissues and water, and I gave her space to simply gather herself and to process the emotions as they were coming up in the interview.

**It can be fine to continue recording during an emotional moment. Use your own best judgment.**

**But if they say, “let's stop,” then you need to honor that request.**

Now, that may absolutely not happen during your oral history interview, but if it does, just know that it's okay and it's okay to turn the recorder off and give the person space.

At the heart of oral history is the commitment to the person controlling their own story. So, an important way to build trust with your narrator is to make it clear to them at the outset of the interview that if they decide there's something that they say on the recorder that they later want to remove, you'll remove it.

It's a way for them to be in control of the story. It's the ethical thing to do to honor their request to make sure that only what they want to be in the public record stays in the public record. Sometimes they'll even ask, "I'd like to say this with the recorder off," and it's imperative that you respect and honor their wishes.

**It's important to be a good listener and get the best story you can get, and it's important how you end the interview.**

**One thing we do is we say to the person, "look into your heart. Take as long as you want. Is there anything else you'd like to say?"**

**And Julia has another powerful way to end.**

It's important to think about how you want to end the oral history.

You want to end the oral history on a note of optimism, or at least that's what I try to do. And the way I do that is I always ask the narrator, "what do they want future generations to know about their story? What lessons can we learn from their story?" And I think that's a great way to empower their voice and to let them speak to future generations down the road.



**Okay, so you got your interview.**

**Now let's talk about how to turn that interview into a podcast.**

Now, the oral history's over. You've done a great job doing your research, coming up with your questions, finding a great narrator, gaining consent. Now it's time to process the interview. And I know with the Acorn Project that you not only get the privilege of collecting an oral history, but that you are going to turn that oral history into a podcast to share with thousands, millions of people.

So, the next thing you need to think about is how to process the interview. I know that The Story Acorn website is actually going to teach you how to use the Descript transcription software, and it's amazing. You upload the audio file, it creates a text version of the interview, and then as you edit the text version, it actually rearranges the audio. So, as you're building your amazing podcast that's going to come out of this interview, you have all of these free tools at your disposal to help you process the interview once it's finished.

**When you make your podcast and send it to us, we'll preserve it on our website.**

**But you'll also want to preserve it in other ways.**

**200 years from now, the history you gathered just might be the very thing that some historian is looking for,**

**and that history will be there because of you.**

I will also add that I would strongly consider, if you're going to take the time to do these interviews and to collect them, to think about how you're going to preserve them.

So, you're going to create an incredible podcast that hundreds of thousands of people are going to listen to, but also you may want to think about archiving the transcript. So, reach out to your local library, reach out to your local historical society because you are creating a primary source that is original that doesn't exist anywhere else that can inform community members and historians hundreds of years from now.

So, what you're doing is really important. You're adding to the historical record, and I strongly encourage you to take the time and preserve that piece of the record.

**Some will ask, why does this matter? It's over.**

## **What difference does it make if these stories are saved?**

It matters because this story that you're collecting could never be told by anyone else, that you are adding something to our knowledge of the past that doesn't exist in textbooks. It doesn't exist anywhere else other than the memory and the experiences of the person you're interviewing. And if you don't take the time to interview that person, it will be lost. That story will be lost forever. So, remember that what you're doing is incredibly important. It's not simply important for a class assignment. It's important for the knowledge we have of the past, the knowledge that we have to understand what people before us live through.

**Not only will you be saving these stories for history, but those you interview will be people you'll always remember.**

**And may even tell your grandchildren about.**

I never will forget an interview that I conducted in Cave Spring, Georgia.

And this was at the request of a group of alumni who were preserving a Rosenwald school in Cave Spring. And Rosenwald Schools were a program created by Tuskegee founder Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist from Chicago, and they created a number of schools across the South for young, Black southerners.

So, this was a Rosenwald in Cave Spring, and I interviewed one of the early attendees who was still alive. Now, this was in 2011, and I had gone to Cave Spring, we were in an old schoolhouse, and it echoed. So already I was worried about my interview because the sound wasn't great. I had to continue because I had limited equipment and limited time, and these folks were there to meet, and I wanted to respect their time.

This man began by telling me of how as a young man, he had to walk four miles to school, but he loved it because he could sing on the way to school, and in the midst of this interview, he broke out into song and this school room with what turned out to be beautiful acoustics for singing, if not for telling a story.

And it was so moving that everyone came who was waiting to be interviewed, came into the room to listen to this man sing. So, you never know what you're going to get on these oral histories, you're going to capture memories, you're going to capture traditions that have been passed down to people and they want to share.

You're going to capture a whole host of interesting and important information that would otherwise be lost.

**We want to do the best we can. Be prepared, understand how our recording device works.**

**But the most important thing of all is to just get the story, no matter what.**

**What if Julia had said, "the acoustics here are bad, I'm leaving." Then that story could have been lost forever.**

Now, I mentioned in that story that the acoustics weren't perfect, but I had to continue anyway. And I want you to keep that in mind that you can leave perfection at the door, that your interview doesn't have to be perfect in audio quality. It doesn't have to be a perfect set of questions, right?

You just have to go in there with good faith and with interest, and with your listening ear and sit down and record. It doesn't have to be perfect. It's going to be something you can use and it's going to be something that's valuable. And remember, if a dog barks, if a truck rattles, if somebody's phone rings, that's okay.

Anything is better than capturing nothing.

**And then we ask that question that we like to ask at the end of an interview.**

**Take a deep breath, take as long as you want. Is there anything else you'd like to say?**

I want to express how excited I am about the Story Acorn Project because the more young folks we have talking to their elders, the more we save. And so, I just want to impress on those who are listening to this, who are going through these lessons, who are doing the work, that you are really creating knowledge, you're creating knowledge that others can use and benefit from. And I want you to believe in the importance of your work.

**Remember we need to get that signed consent form.**

We're going to provide you on the website with a sample consent form. This is part of the ethics of oral history, gaining that informed consent, and the consent form should be the last thing that you ask the narrator to do. The consent form is the way in which the narrator gives you permission to save and share their story. It's also what you would need if you decide to preserve the interview with the local historical society or the school. You need that consent form to donate along with

the interview so that the collecting organization has permission to do so. To save that story.

**We humans are storytelling creatures. We wake up in the morning telling stories.**

**We go to school telling stories and hearing stories, stories help us understand who we are.**

**A lot of people think history is about names and dates, but that's not true.**

**That's boring.**

**History is about the stories.**

If you've been in a history class in school, you probably think that history is all memorization, memorizing names and dates, and then being tested on your memory of those names and dates.

But actually, history is about stories. It's about the stories of human experience and human change and the way that humans affect life as we live it. So just remember that you are preserving a piece of history. You're preserving the ways in which we know about the past. So, when you preserve these stories, you're also learning something about yourself.

You'll find so much common ground with people who've lived through the past, their struggles, their achievements, and how that world that they lived in actually shapes the world that you live in.

**When people do something for the first time, it doesn't matter what it is, they might be scared.**

**That's normal.**

**Even Julia was scared her first time out.**

I remember the first time I got a recorder and set out for my first interview. I was scared to death. I was so scared I was going to do something wrong. I was going to, you know, turn off the recorder, it was going to go dead. I didn't have enough batteries. And once I started, I fell in love with it.

So, you don't have to be a college professor to do oral histories. You can be anybody. And that's the beauty of oral history practice is that anybody can do it. It's a way that we all can collect and preserve the past.

**In one of his novels, William Faulkner said, "The past has never gone. It's not even past."**

**We asked Julia what she thought that meant.**

I think we inherit the legacies of the past, and in that way it's never gone. It's always with us. Because we are the inheritors of the collective decisions of millions of people across time. And we have to face that. Just as we're shaping the world in our own image, so have others before us. And so, we're a part of this long continuum of time.

**We're the inheritors of the collective decisions of millions of people across time. That's pretty cool.**

**And since we're inheritors, it's our job,**

**A job for each of us,**

**To document those decisions across time.**

**And pass them on to our generation,**

**And to the generations that follow.**