

The Bread we Break: An Oral History Activity

For me it started as a warm tortilla with a thick glob of salted butter, handmade by my Wela Maria. In my mind I am back on her red porch swing, swinging my feet and eating my tortilla. Even with a napkin butter always managed to run down my arm. As I got older it became a concha, and then one day my father said, “Mija, dip it in your coffee.” Every soggy bite of bread reminds me of home. Both of these people have left this earth, but with the right tortilla or the right *concha y café* combination I am transported back to those memories and moments with loved ones.

A time for physical and social nourishment, breaking bread in any culture is an important tradition and often something that brings people together after a long day apart tending to daily lives. Food is a strong connector to the past, the taste, touch, smell and texture of an item can unlock memories that go beyond the physical experience, but also who that meal was shared with and where. Using food as a conversation topic is a wonderful way to unlock experiences of the past, and the technology we have today allows the ability to collect the stories of the community with food as the catalyst for conversation.

Oral histories are a great way to collect histories. According to the Nebraska State Historical Society, “oral history” is defined as, “A primary source document created in an interview setting with a narrator for the purpose of collecting and preserving that person's firsthand information about an event, period of time or way of life and making it available to researchers.” In this case, the researchers may be other people in your family or community. With the technology at our

disposal, we have full authority over capturing our own histories, and those of our community. The city offers several businesses mentioned in the website that have been here for generations and using them as a way to facilitate the conversation, below are some questions to get you started! With oral histories it is important to remember that it is a person telling their story, so do not feel like these are questions you need to answer, but rather some steppingstones so you can forge your own path and let the story tell itself.

It is important to know that with these conversations may also bring up difficult memories for some. Food insecurity is still an issue in the United States, and San Antonio. San Antonio's Westside was one of the areas featured in a 1968 CBS program called, "Hunger in America." History isn't always comfortable, but collecting it and recording it is essential for accurately remembering occurrences in the past.

Oral History Process

1. Decide on your topic.

For this instance we are using food as the bread that brings this all together. Perhaps you want to know what your grandparent's ate after church on Sundays, or what a big family occasion feast looked like.

2. Find your interviewee and plan your interview date and location.

Decide together if this is something you want to do in person or remotely. There are options for both methods that will make your interview successful.

3. Ask questions that are open for story-length answers.

As much fun as a back-and-forth conversation could be, it is important to remember that this process is best for collecting the stories and detailed memories of your interviewee.

Think about what you want to know, and make sure the questions are ones that the interviewee is comfortable answering.

4. Record and transcribe

Whether it be in person or remote, there are options for recording and saving your interview. Below will be further resources on conducting your own interview!

Potential Oral History Question

- **What did meals look like when you were younger?**
- **Would you share a meal with you family?**
- **What role does bread play in your culture?**
- **Do you have a favorite food memory?**
- **What is your favorite dish?**
- **Is your favorite restaurant still around? What would you eat when you went?**
- **What neighborhood did you grow up in? Were there any local bakeries? If so, is it still around?**
- **Who do you wish you could have a meal with one more time, and what would you be eating?**
- **What foods connect you to your past? Are there any traditions you continue?**
(Example: Barbacoa and Big Red on Sundays, or a King's Cake)
- **Are there any food traditions do you wish you could bring back?**
- **What feelings come up while discussing this topic?**

Further Oral History Resources

- Oral History Association Website <https://www.oralhistory.org/>
- Manual of Best Practices <https://www.oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-complete-manual/>
- Remote Interviewing Resources <https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>
- Oral History Web Guides <https://www.oralhistory.org/web-guides-to-doing-oral-history/>