TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES—MTSU
NEWSLETTER: FEBRUARY 2016

WELCOME!
Teaching with Primary Sources—Middle Tennessee State University, administered by the Center for Historic Preservation, engages learners of all ages in using primary sources to explore major issues and questions in many different disciplines.
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NEWS

• Due to the winter storm last week, we have had to reschedule the workshop “Giving Voice to the Past: Oral Histories as Primary Sources in the Classroom” for Friday, March 4th at the Nashville Public Library—Downtown Branch. We have a handful of open spots now available for this workshop. If you are interested in attending, please email Kira Duke.
• TPS-MTSU is partnering with the University of Memphis History Department and the National Civil Rights Museum for a special workshop “Remembering the Memphis Massacre: Teaching Reconstruction’s History with Primary Sources.” This workshop will take place on Friday, April 15th at the National Civil Rights Museum. For more information or to reserve your spot, please email Kira Duke.

“AWESOME” SOURCE OF THE MONTH:

Crazy quilt, detail [1978]
Listen to quilt-maker Zenna Todd, from the Blue Ridge area of North Carolina, talk about her “crazy quilt” in this audio recording from the Quilts and Quiltmaking in America collection.

THEME: ORAL HISTORIES

Have you ever asked your parents or grandparents what life was like for them when they were young? Have you ever asked a veteran about his or her wartime experiences? Have you ever told a story from your own past to someone younger than you? If so, then you have participated in the creation of oral histories.

The Library’s audio and written oral history collections can be found here and here. (You may have to sift through collections of musical recordings, but keep in mind that many music tracks have some spoken parts, too). This issue will help you get started using oral histories in the classroom by providing a highlight of the collections and particular primary sources that may be more appealing and accessible to students.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

• February 12 (Collierville & Arlington) - “Introduction to Teaching with Primary Sources” for Collierville and Arlington Community Schools In-service.
• February 25 (Murfreesboro) - “Silver or Gold: Exploring the Currency Debates of the Late 1800s and Early 1900s” in partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta—Nashville Branch at the Heritage Center of Murfreesboro from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. To register, email Kira Duke.
• March 11 (Franklin) - “Crossing the Veil: A Young W.E.B. DuBois in Rural Tennessee” session at the Tennessee Council of Social Studies Conference. For more information on the conference, click here.
• March 18 (Murfreesboro) - “Primary Sources for Primary Grades” Workshop at the Heritage Center of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. To register, email Kira Duke.

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Lesson Idea—Building a Lesson around an Oral History

Oral histories are great primary sources for opening up a window into the past through the experiences of one person. As rewarding as they are to use, however, they do pose certain challenges in the classroom. For starters, they are often lengthy texts that you must excerpt before giving to students. Because they are told to someone (who then writes them down), they may contain the idiosyncrasies of everyday speech. (In other words, it can be like following a rambling story of your nutty old uncle.) Furthermore, students might not understand how one person’s story can be of much significance in the broader scheme of things.

All these concerns can be easily addressed with a little preparation. This example will focus on a selected oral history by Marshall Hill, an African American man who has done all sorts of things in his industrious life. This is a good one to use because it’s relatively short (just one page of actual narrative) and is geographically diverse. Start off by having students read this silently in class or as homework before class. Then take turns reading it aloud so that students can get the feel of the spoken story. How would you describe Mr. Hill? What parts stand out to you? What do you want to know more about?

Next, use primary and secondary sources to illustrate Mr. Hill’s life. Start off by zooming into Obion County on this 1878 map of Tennessee, where Mr. Hill was born. What types of features does the map depict? What does this say about this area of Tennessee in the 1870s? Introduce the following sources to students and ask similar questions (you may wish to divide them into groups and give each group one or two sources): ruins of an open hearth furnace for iron-making; secondary source article about the Birmingham iron industry (first four paragraphs should be enough); photographs of an African American iron worker and an iron worker’s house in Alabama; “The Gravel Train” sheet music; this photograph of African American road workers; map of the gold fields of Alaska and the Yukon; secondary source article about African Americans in California at the turn of the 20th century; photographs of stone quarry workers and loggers; 1912 map of Hawaii; panoramic photograph of Dawson in the Yukon; “The Negro in Yukon” newspaper article (bottom of second column); and photograph of a shoe shiner. (You can download all the sources in PDF form here.)

How does each of these sources shed light onto Mr. Hill’s story? How does each visual source convey information that is supplemental to the text of the oral history? How do the primary sources and secondary sources differ, especially in the type of background context they provide Mr. Hill’s narrative? At this point, you may wish to have students create a timeline on the wall of different events from Mr. Hill’s life, and tape the primary source images to the timeline in the appropriate places. Another way of organizing the sources visually would be to create a timeline over a map of the United States, and follow Mr. Hill on his many adventures, posting parts of the narrative and the primary sources onto the map. What additional observations can you make about his life when viewed in these ways? Do you think his life was typical or atypical for white or black Americans during this era?

This lesson has an additional activity for high school students, looking at multiple perspectives. What might the experiences of other Americans be like during this era? Divide students into three groups and give each group some copies of these 2- to 3-page excerpts from the oral histories of Mollie Grove Smith, L.C. McBride, and Virginia S.W. Williamson (originals are 6-17 pages long). Then have students discuss within their groups the perspective of their particular interviews, and how it differs from that of Marshall Hill. What kinds of opportunities did each have? What did each consider important to talk about? Each group should then report out so that everyone in the classroom gets an understanding of the multiple perspectives offered by these four different interviews. You can then have students write an essay about multiple perspectives of the Progressive Era, or have them research on loc.gov for primary source images to accompany their group’s particular interview.

These lesson ideas can be adapted to meet TN standards for 5th grade and high school English Language Arts (Reading: Informational Text) and Social Studies/U.S. History & Geography (5.31, US.14 & 21).
Examining the Oral Histories conducted for the Veterans History Project can illustrate for students the realities of military life, particularly the military experience for African Americans and women. The following interviews include white and black women and men who served in World War II. These interviews include insights into segregated military life, as well as a general sense of the racial climate before, during, and after World War II. Using these interviews, juxtapose sections that highlight the differences in experience caused by the segregation of not only the sexes, but also segregation by race.

As a class, read and discuss the interview excerpts, linked here. Then have students make and present a Venn diagram (in groups or individually) highlighting the shared and different experiences found in the interviews. Examining the racial and military experience through multicultural and multi-gendered views as well as through textbook and documentary records of that same experience will allow students to see that for every generalization we must make in order to teach history, there are thousands of personal stories with unique experiences that are equally important.

This lesson idea can be adapted to meet TN standards for high school African American History and U.S. History & Geography (AAH.32, AAH.33, US.64, and US.65).

#### Featured Feature—Oral History Projects: How-To Guide

Classroom oral history projects can be a great experience for students to build skills in different curriculum areas such as history, English Language Arts, journalism, and technology. They can also be daunting to educators who are organizing this type of project for the first time. How much time should you allot? What is the focus of the project? What will be the final product? These are all important questions to be considered as you plan for this type of student project.

The first question to consider is what type of project you want your students to complete. Most oral history projects fall into two categories: biographical or thematic. Biographical projects focus on telling the life story of an individual. This type of project may work best with younger students. The other type of project is thematic, in which all interviews focus on a single event or topic. Once you have decided what type of project you want your students to embark on, then you need to determine the goals of the project, including what the final outcome or product you want to come out of the overall project.

The overall success of an oral history project rests on two steps: research/historical context and the pre-interview work of the students. It is important for students to understand the historical context for the experiences of their interviewee. This will help them to develop better preliminary questions and to ask better follow-up questions during the course of the interview. You might also consider having students practice interviewing each other.

After the interview has taken place, spend some time with your students analyzing the content of the interviews prior to having students work on their final product. Final products can take a variety of formats such as papers, art projects, and documentaries. A successful final product should show how students have integrated what they learned from the interview with what they learned during the research phase to come to a new understanding of the overall topic of the project.

For more information on planning an oral history project, check out the American Folklife Center’s oral history resources.
Setting Up Video and Audio Equipment For Interview [1981]

An important part of the oral history process is determining how you will record the interview for future use. What type of equipment is being used in this image? How does this compare with equipment we might use today? How do changes in technology factor into the long-term preservation of interviews?

American English Dialect Recordings

The American English Dialect Recordings from the Center of Applied Linguistics Collection provide a very interesting way to delve into the lives and interests of everyday people in the United States. This particular interview (transcript) [audio] features a 17-year-old white male from White Pine, Tennessee. This interview covers topics ranging from classes and views on education to politics, and his views on discrimination. This is just one instance in which interviews taken for purposes other than history can be used to discuss social, cultural, and political issues. How prevalent today are the issues discussed in this interview? Do people today experience the issues this young man talks about?

“MAN ON THE STREET”

One day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, fieldworkers for the American Folklife Center interviewed people “on the street” in ten American cities, including Nashville. The Nashville recordings not only record people’s immediate reactions (“Man-on-the-Street”), but also their reactions a year later (“Dear Mr. President”), all from an African American point of view.

The Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project collection provides a glimpse into the lives of formerly enslaved people. These interviews also offer the opportunity to discuss interviewer biases and historical context with your students. The interviews, written in the dialect of the speaker instead of in standard English, provide the chance to ask your students questions such as “Would the author have transcribed the interview this way if the speaker had been white?” This also offers an opportunity to discuss that the slave narratives were compiled as part of the Federal Writers’ Project, which began in 1936. Therefore, most of those interviewed were quite young when they were emancipated, like Narcissus Young, a ninety-six-year-old formerly enslaved woman from Tennessee. How might this affect her view of enslavement?