

Folklife & Fieldwork

An Introduction to
Cultural Documentation



American Folklife Center
Library of Congress

Folklife and Fieldwork:

An Introduction to Cultural Documentation



Fourth Edition

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

When the first edition of *Folklife and Fieldwork* was published in 1979, our readers had a difficult choice to make: the better audio quality offered by a bulky reel-to-reel tape recorder or the convenience of the newfangled cassette deck. With one of those two machines, plus a single-lens-reflex camera and a few rolls of film, the 1979 fieldworker was equipped to document the world. Earlier editions of this guide gave great advice regarding the handling and preservation of these older forms of documentation. These tips are still relevant for some archival collections, but not for most fieldwork. Born-digital documentation requires a whole new set of practices—new ways of recording and new methods of preservation.

Since the first edition appeared there has also been a surge of interest in personal archiving. Preserving family history, genealogy, and community history has never been more popular. Popular interviewing projects like the Veterans History Project and StoryCorps are leading the way in a new era of oral history collecting, and both of their collections are part of the American Folklife Center archive. While this book prioritizes the documentation of folklife, by which we mean traditional culture and heritage, the guidelines offered here for interviewing and documentation apply to a broad range of topics.

Folklife and Fieldwork has been redesigned to make it more user-friendly and more chronological. In large part, the table of contents serves as a step-by-step checklist for designing and implementing a fieldwork project.

For more information on the questions raised in this manual, as well for the latest discussions on specific technologies and techniques, please consult the online version of *Folklife and Fieldwork* at www.loc.gov/folklife

The American Folklife Center: Who We Are and What We Do

The American Folklife Center (AFC) was created in 1976 by the U.S. Congress, making us America's designated national folklife center. Our mandate is "to preserve and present American folklife," which we achieve in many ways. We conduct and facilitate research on folklife, documenting all kinds of traditional culture. We provide reference services to Congress and the public, so if you have a question about folklife, get in touch! We provide training through hands-on field schools, as well through online guides. We sponsor live performances, lectures, and exhibits, most of which occur at our home base at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. (Many of them are available online as videos as well.) And, of course, we create publications, including this one.

One of our most important functions is maintaining one of the world's largest archives of folklife materials, including songs, stories, and creative expressions of people from throughout the United States and around the world. The American Folklife Center archive contains about 6,000,000 items. Approximately 400,000 of these are sound recordings, dating from 1890 to the present. We have in our collections the very first ethnographic field recordings, a set of wax cylinders from 1890, documenting Passamaquoddy songs and stories from Maine. We have thousands of classic folksongs, folktales, blues, and dance tunes, recorded on acetate discs in the 1930s and 1940s. We also have brand-new, born digital collections of music, song, speech, photos, and video documenting folklore and folklife. We are best known as the world's foremost repository of American folklife material, but we also have collections of traditional culture from throughout the world in virtually every known recording format. AFC is also the home of the Veterans History Project (VHP), which was established by an act of Congress in 2000, and which has collected audio and video recordings, journals, letters, and photos documenting first-person wartime experiences of over 100,000 American veterans from WWI to the current day.

The word "folklore" was coined by an Englishman named William John Thoms in 1846, as a "good Saxon compound" to replace the Latinate term "popular antiquities." The word "folklife" comes to us from Germanic and Scandinavian languages, and was popularized in American English by Don Yoder, a folklore professor from Pennsylvania who helped start the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival, which is generally considered the first American "folklife festival" (as opposed to folk festival), and which strongly influenced many subsequent folklife festivals. Yoder also donated his most important audio collections to AFC.

The AFC has a small and versatile staff. Luckily, we also have the Library

of Congress's state-of-the-art facilities to help preserve all this great material. A good portion of our holdings are available online, and we're always working to add to our online collections. You're welcome to contact AFC staff for information or visit us in Washington, D.C. To learn more about the AFC's services and programs, and to see our extensive list of online publications, presentations, and collections, please visit our website.

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Folklife Today Blog: <http://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/>

RSS/email list sign up: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/rss.html>

What is “Folklife Fieldwork?”

Most people know the word “folklore,” which includes oral traditions such as stories, sayings, and songs—and this is a large part of what AFC documents. But, to describe our mission, we use the broader term “folklife,” in order to encompass other forms of culture, including customs, cuisine, crafts, dress, celebrations, music, and traditional architecture.

When Congress created the American Folklife Center in 1976, it defined American folklife as:

The traditional, expressive, shared culture of various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, and regional. Expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, and handicraft; these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained or perpetuated without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction.

The range of materials we consider “folklife” includes the following list. This is just a sampling, though—many other things are also folklife!

- Folk and traditional songs, music, and dance
- Any kind of orally-told story, including jokes, legends, and family histories
- Sayings such as proverbs, riddles, rhymes, greetings, and insults

- Folk beliefs and practices about religion, healing, and magic
- Calendar customs such as annual holidays, saints' days, festivals, and pageants
- Rites of passage such as birth celebrations, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and funerals
- Traditional food preparation, recipes, and symbolic meanings of food
- Vernacular buildings such as houses, barns, mills, and outbuildings
- Clothing such as formal regalia and ethnic and traditional dress
- Textiles and needlework such as knitting, weaving, quilting, and embroidery
- Handicrafts such as carvings, paintings, paper-cuts, beadwork, sculpture, and braiding
- Traditional use of land and space
- Technical skills and knowledge related to traditional occupations

Here's a handy tip for using the list of genres on this page. If you've encountered songs, dances, or other practices, but you aren't sure if they count as "folk," remember the U.S. government's definition of "folklife," just above the genre list. If the practices were "learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are maintained or perpetuated without formal instruction or institutional direction," then chances are they're folklife.

In the 19th century, scholars wanted to document folklife because they were afraid it was disappearing. They defined it as cultural remnants from the remote past, and believed it was strongest in poorly developed or isolated communities, so they saw their work as a race against time. Nowadays, folklorists believe that folklife is universal and dynamic. Some forms of traditional culture remain the same, others evolve, and still others are created all the time, so there's always new folklore. Many stories, for example, now originate in internet-based virtual communities and emerge into contemporary oral tradition. Think of urban legends constantly spreading in the news and online, or the many tradition-inspired art forms out there, from bluegrass music to graffiti. Think of jokes you tell with your friends, rhymes that help you remember things, or easy cooking tips you picked up from your family. Folklife is alive and well in the 21st century, and every single one of us participates.

There are many different words for what we call "folklore" and "folklife." In Germanic and Scandinavian countries, you're most likely to run into a variant of "folk": "volkskunde" in German or "folkliv" in Swedish, for example. In Romance languages people often use some form of the word "popular," so folklore is called "traditions populaires" in French. In Spanish, people often use "folclor" or "folklore," but in many countries this carries connotations of artificially staged versions of folk traditions, so people sometimes use terms

such as “folclor popular” “artes populares” or “tradición popular” to talk about traditional folklore. In international legal contexts, folklore and folklife are referred to as “cultural heritage,” with folklore forming part of “intangible cultural heritage” and material folklife genres such as crafts and architecture forming part of “tangible cultural heritage.”

Researching folklife may seem easy: after all, there’s plenty of information online and in libraries about most folklife topics, such as (say) English folktales, African-American spirituals, or Mongolian yurts. Just google it, look it up, or visit the library, right?

But did you ever wonder how that information got there? How did the world find out about these topics in the first place? Often, it was because someone did



Maasai fieldworker Ann Sintoyia Tome (far left, with headphones) records Maasai women’s songs during the Cultural Documentation Training Program for Indigenous Communities in Il Ngwesi village, Kenya. Photo by Guha Shankar.

fieldwork—the difficult but rewarding work of recording firsthand observations and interviews with community experts. Yurts don’t describe themselves, and most traditional yurt-builders are too busy to write a book or an online article. So someone had to measure, draw, photograph, and write down notes about yurts.

Researchers even conducted interviews with traditional yurt builders—all so we could google “yurt” and find out all about them.

Fieldwork is what we call this work of firsthand observation. Fieldwork is recording or documenting what we see and hear in a particular setting, whether that be a rural farming community or a city neighborhood, a local fish market or a grandmother’s living room.

Fieldwork is gathering together for analysis the raw material that may one day find its way into a library or museum (or even Wikipedia). Most excitingly, fieldwork is interviewing the greatest living experts on the traditions that interest us, most of whom are not rich or famous, but known only within their communities.

Folklife fieldwork can help tell the story of a community in many ways, leading to community engagement and cultural revitalization. The products of



Lindon Bilal interviews WWII veteran Abdul Kariem during the VHP “Do Your Part” Initiative of summer 2015.

folklife fieldwork, in the form of audio and video recordings, notes, drawings, and photos, may be used to produce anything from a scholarly book to a TV show, or from an essay to an exhibit. At the same time, if we care for them, they will remain safely archived for future generations. This book will help guide you through the documentation process.

Folklife fieldwork is a lot like the kind of fieldwork done in anthropology. The differences are mainly in what each discipline emphasizes. Cultural anthropology may look at any aspect of a culture, including political organization, kinship, or attitudes to war. Folklife uses similar methodologies to focus specifically on creative expressions, performances, art forms, and beliefs. Oral history, too, has many similarities to folklife. However, oral historians are usually seeking facts about the past, an accurate historical narrative based on firsthand experience. Folklife is more interested in seeing the world from the perspective of the person being interviewed, including the meanings their thoughts and memories hold for them. Work in the three disciplines can be very similar, especially where interviewing is concerned. Books or training guides created by anthropologists and oral historians can be very helpful to folklorists as well.

Designing the Project

Think about Your Goals and Outcomes

It's always a good idea to have a clear set of goals before you set out to do research. Try to create a statement of purpose that can be expressed in a few sentences. This can serve as a way to introduce yourself to community members, so they'll understand why you're hanging around, recording conversations, and taking pictures. Each time you conduct an interview, you can use it to explain the purpose of your project. You want to be honest with people and have them feel comfortable with your presence, so make sure you can explain what you're doing openly and honestly.

Folklorists doing fieldwork are sometimes mistaken for police, government agents, or even foreign spies! One way to prevent this misunderstanding is to explain to people clearly why you're in their community taking pictures and talking to their neighbors.

Your primary goal may be to develop a better understanding of a community, to help community members receive recognition or apply for a grant, or to contribute documentation to a local archive. Among your goals may also be a specific type of end product, and this can help determine the kinds of documentation you create. If you want to write a book or a website, then written notes, audio recordings, and photos may be the most useful kinds of documentation to bring back. If you're creating a radio show or podcast, the quality of the audio may be important. If you're making a film, TV show, or online video, obviously you'll have to think about video equipment, as well as about securing shooting locations and other logistical questions. What if you're recording memories of your family members just to preserve them for the future? If that's the case, think about the best way to accomplish that. Maybe video files take up so much digital storage space you worry your family won't keep them, but smaller audio files seem manageable. It's up to you—but the next section may be helpful when you're making these decisions.

One of the first decisions to make is whether to do your fieldwork alone or in a team. Many of the best field projects in the AFC archive were accomplished by teams of fieldworkers rather than individuals. Teams allow you to divide the labor, to document the process of fieldwork (for example, by photographing interviews in progress), and to brainstorm with teammates. They also require you to negotiate with your teammates, beginning right here with the goals of the project.

Decide What to Document (and Why)

If you've read this far, chances are you already have a topic in mind. If not, however, don't worry. The following tips apply whether you're refining an idea you're already working with, or coming up with a topic from scratch.

Folklife is everywhere, so you can't just set out to "document folklife;" a good project needs to be much more limited in scope. In fact, it's usually best to have three interrelated limits on your project: a specific group or segment of the population, a specific tradition or subject matter, and a specific place. Having only one or two of these can often lead to a project too large to handle. Deciding to study the playground games of children, for example, leaves you with millions of playgrounds to look at, but studying the playground games of children on the South Side of Chicago may be manageable. Studying all the folk traditions of Cambodians in Philadelphia is

a long-term, multi-year project, but studying their traditional music or community celebrations may be manageable. When the project is underway, you may also discover that sub-topics emerge. Studying games in the playgrounds of the South

Side, for example, involves studying games on particular playgrounds. The games on each playground, meanwhile, may include counting-out rhymes to determine who goes first, songs sung during each game, and rules and strategies for each game. A Cambodian wedding, similarly, includes cooking, music-making, clothing design, and many other categories of expression. The more you look, the more you'll see.



So how do you choose your limits? For the place, we recommend a manageable area like a small town, a rural district, a city neighborhood, or even something more specific: how about a work site, school, senior center, or city block? For the group, we recommend an age cohort (e.g. seniors or kids), an ethnic group (e.g. Mexican Americans or Italian Americans), a family, an occupational group (e.g. fishermen or construction workers), or a religious group.



As for the tradition or subject matter, if you don't have one in mind, a list of some different kinds of folklife might be helpful. See our list on pages 2-3, above.

Think about Archiving, Sustainability, and Access

Whether you're documenting with a specific end product in mind, or trying to preserve folklife for the future, it's important to think about what's going to happen to the materials you collect and create. If all goes well, you'll have many digital still photographs, sound recordings, video recordings, and word processing files. In addition, you may pick up, for example, a few maps, posters of events you documented in the community, a program booklet or two, a few handcrafted items offered as a gift by an appreciative artist, and assorted expense receipts, letters, and other paper items. Before you begin, consider how, and maybe where, your collection can be safeguarded, carefully preserved, and made accessible to interested parties.



Fieldworker John Ole Tingoy shares data from his laptop with other fieldworkers and with Laikipia Maasai community members during the Cultural Documentation Training Program for Indigenous Communities in Il Ngwesi village, Kenya. Photo by Guha Shankar.

Remember, ideally, your collection will be interesting not only to you but to others as well. But if the collection remains under your bed, no one will ever know it's there. If you'd like to allow others to use your collection, think about where you might place it to make that possible. Community libraries, local and regional museums, and state and local historical societies often maintain folklife and local history collections, and many universities also house archives of folklife materials. Staff members of these institutions and organizations may

be willing to talk with you about how to handle your material, and will be able to say whether or not they're likely to acquire your collection. Remember that such archives are under no obligation to take your materials. In fact, most archives have collection development policies in place that may preclude them from accepting your collections. But the first step is the same: get in touch with someone at the archive and see if they'll discuss it with you.

If you'd like to place your collection within a particular institution, always contact that institution ahead of time to make sure that they are willing and able to take the collection and care for it. Ask for specific instructions on file formats and standards they accept, as well as the naming conventions they use to describe and organize their collections.

Whether or not you get advice from an institution, it's a good idea to plan out how you'll file and store your collection in advance. Along with paper items you collect, such as posters advertising community events or maps drawn by your interviewees, preserve any paper-based administrative files, since they include information on origins, goals and the overall planning and carrying-out of the project. A basic system of file folders is fine for this paper collection. Having the system set up in advance allows you to file the materials you collect each day after returning from your fieldwork. Sample file headings might include: Planning, Correspondence, Budget, Equipment, Fieldnotes, Release Forms, Publications, Ephemera, and Maps. (You can always add folders as you go, too.) We recommend using acid-neutral archival folders and writing the categories directly on them in pencil, since stick-on labels can fall off and leave glue or residue on collection materials.

Of course, most of your collection will consist of digital files. Before you start, it's a good idea to have a few external hard drives ready that will be large enough to back up your files. If you're giving your collection to an institution, ask about their preferences for how to name your files. Otherwise, we suggest you name your files according to a plan that will use words to identify them as belonging to the same collection, and numbers to identify the sequence in which they were recorded, with your name and the general topic of the collection in



If you preserve your fieldwork materials, they may be useful for generations to come. In this photo, three Pawnee speakers together with their linguist assistant listen to Pawnee recordings in the Folklife Reading Room. Photo by Stephen Winick.

the filename, so (for example) Chicago_Games_Winick_Interview_1.wav and Chicago_Games_Winick_Photo_1.nef. If you rename your files at the end of each fieldwork day before backing up the files, you'll keep up with this task pretty easily, and your backup files will all have the same names as the originals.

“The Fieldworker Is the First Archivist.”

Here at AFC, the statement above is downright proverbial. When we say this, we mean that the fieldworker's actions often determine if a collection is safe and accessible. Our archive has some very old and important collections whose fieldworkers did not provide essential information, such as names and places, and it's very hard for researchers, or even trained archivists, to find the items they need. By following our advice here, and in the section on metadata below, you'll be your own archivist, creating a collection that can be preserved and served to researchers for years to come.

Consider the Ethics of Your Project

Typically, we record the folklife of particular communities and groups because we respect them and think their traditions are important and interesting. Obviously, we don't want to do anything to harm the communities we study, or the individuals within them. Since our interviewees are giving us their time and trust, it's also important that we be honest and truthful with them. For these reasons, you shouldn't record anyone without their knowledge, do research under false pretenses, or lie to the community you're studying. You shouldn't use their

In ethnographic fieldwork, it is crucial to establish a rapport with your interviewees. Part of this is remembering to treat them fairly, as you would any friend. A strong set of ethical principles built into the project helps. Folklorist Beverly Robinson (right) clearly had a great rapport with Jessie Lee Smith. They were photographed by Carl Fleischhauer on the porch of Smith's home in Tifton, Georgia, August, 1977. South-Central Georgia Folklife Project Collection.



voices or images without permission. You don't want to use the information they give you in a way they don't approve of, or publish it in ways that will harm or embarrass them. All of this requires care on your part.

Are you doing your project while you're a student or faculty member at a school or university? If you want to use any part of it for credit in any course, or even if you want to identify yourself as university-affiliated while doing fieldwork, your school may have specific requirements. Interviewees are often considered "human subjects," just like people in medical experiments, and universities are very careful about regulating human subject research. Talk to professors who do ethnography or oral history to find out about your school's Institutional Review Board, often known as the "IRB."

One way to get a handle on fieldwork ethics is to take a look at some ethical standards statements from professional organizations. See the links on our website at www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/

Figure Out What You'll Need

Different projects have different equipment needs, but most projects will benefit from some version of the list below. Think about your own project, and decide which of the following you'll use:

- Notepads, pens, and pencils.
- A camera with extra memory cards, batteries, charger, and accessories (lenses, lights, tripod, etc).
- A digital audio or video recorder with 2 microphones, mic cables, extra memory cards, batteries, and a pair of headphones. Audio equipment should be capable of recording WAV files at 96khz/24bits; video equipment should certainly be capable of shooting High Definition (HD), and preferably 4K or UHD.
- A laptop, notebook, or tablet computer, with power source or charger, and if possible a backup hard drive. This can help you take notes as well as process audio, video, and photo files in the field.
- An extension cord and power strip.
- A steel tape measure for recording the dimensions of material objects.
- A GPS or map, so you can get to the site and find your way around.
- Release forms. (More on this later!)
- Appropriate dress, which is both comfortable and/or right for the occasion. Some fieldworkers may need a stout pair of shoes and casual clothes, for example; others collecting at events such as a family dinner or a church service, will need more formal clothes.



This collection of recording technology demonstrates the changes that have occurred in audio and photographic documentation during the existence of the AFC's archive. AFC has materials in all the formats represented here, from cylinders and wire recordings to material recorded on mobile phones. Photo by Stephen Winick.

Preparing for Fieldwork

Do a Little Research

Before going into the field, you'll want to prepare by researching your topic online and at the library. Whether you're studying blues guitar players, children's games, or stories told by soldiers in the Iraq war, there's probably both online and published information that can help you ask informed questions. Similarly, it's a good idea to become familiar with the neighborhood or area where your interviewees live before you start your formal meetings with them—if only to ensure you don't get lost on the way to your first interview!

Make Community Connections

The very first step of your fieldwork that takes place “in the field” is simply meeting and making friends with people in the community you'll be working with. Begin with whomever you happen to know in that community. If you don't know anyone, try visits to local civic and cultural clubs, places of worship, craft

stores, or veterans organizations. Attend public events like ethnic and community festivals and volunteer fire department fundraisers. Finally, seek out local people whose job is to know about the community, including folks who work at local historical societies, community centers, arts centers, colleges and universities, and libraries. Explain to your initial contacts what your project is and ask who knows the most about the tradition you're seeking.

It's also a good idea to ask whether your initial contacts know of anyone working on a similar project. You may find out folks within the community are already documenting the traditions you're interested in. In that case you'll want to compare notes and, if possible, coordinate your efforts. Ask them how your work can support community documentation. Also, think about how you might help each other preserve your collections.



A notebook is handy for all stages of fieldwork, especially preliminary chats. Before a person has agreed to a formal interview, you can ask them a few questions and jot down the answers. While tablets and mobile devices are useful for some fieldwork encounters, your interviewee will be sure you're paying attention if you take notes on paper. Here Tom McBride talks to a participant in Montana's Babb Rodeo on Labor Day, September 3, 1979. Montana Folklife Survey Project Collection. Photo by Barre Toelken.

Decide What (Besides Interviews) to Record

Ethnographic interviews are the heart of many fieldwork projects, but you can document a lot of other things as well. Depending on your topic and your



Thomas Adler photographs a headstone in a small cemetery in Patrick County, Virginia, September 1978. Blue Ridge Parkway Folklife Project Collection. Photo by Charles Wolfe.

goals, you might want to make audio or video recordings of folklore or folk music performances, or of community celebrations, rituals, and other enactments. You might want to photograph buildings, fences, gravestones, or other elements of the built environment. Before you start your fieldwork, think about what kinds of objects, events, and procedures besides interviews you'll want to document, and make a plan for how to do it.

Think about Participant Observation

One of the main methodologies employed by folklife fieldworkers is “participant observation.” This means (of course) that you are participating in the culture as well as observing. If you really want to know about folk music, for example, you might take lessons with a singer or musician. If you want to know about weaving or cooking or planning a traditional wedding, you might end up learning to do these things alongside your interviewees. You can also offer to do important but unglamorous tasks, like serving food at a community



Participant observation can take many forms. Fieldworker Alan Jabbour is also a fiddler, and used this skill to obtain a demonstration of “beating straws,” or playing fiddlesticks, by John R. Griffin of Lennox, Georgia on August 6, 1977. South-Central Georgia Folklife Project Collection. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer.

celebration or cleaning up the church after a wedding. As long as you’re doing this with other members of the community, you’ll be learning more about how they live, celebrate, and express themselves, while also offering them a service they can appreciate. You’ll learn a lot about how traditional tasks are done, and also how they are taught—both very important aspects of traditional culture.

Participant observation of this kind is a great way to learn more about the folk traditions you want to document. Most traditional artists are not very accustomed to researchers recording their materials, so you may seem like an odd duck. But they’re very familiar with passing on their traditions to other practitioners, so learning the tradition in the traditional way can make your teachers more comfortable with your role. It also demonstrates your commitment to them, and encourages them to get to know and trust you. As you prepare to enter the field, think about the cultural forms and processes you might want to learn, and the tasks you can offer to do.

Decide on the First People to Interview

After making initial contacts and thinking about the scope of your project, you’ll want to find people you can talk to in depth about the traditions you’re studying. You can interview almost anyone about folklife, but often certain people are especially well qualified to talk about folklife because of their good

memories, long lives, performance skills, or particular roles within a community. Folklorists sometimes refer to these people as “tradition bearers.” Usually many people within a community know who the tradition bearers are, so your best bet is to ask around.

Sometimes your initial contacts may offer to talk to someone for you: the local librarian might say, “Mr. Mathunas, who comes in here every week, knows a lot about that. I’ll mention your interest and see if I can set something up.” This can be helpful, but doesn’t always pan out. It’s better to get the person’s contact information and get permission to mention that your contact the librarian suggested you get in touch. Once you have the names of three or four interviewees, those folks can probably suggest others. Now you’re ready to think about the interviews!

Get Comfortable with Your Equipment

Most folklorists have had the awful experience of returning from an interview to find out the recorder didn’t work or the mic didn’t pick up the interviewee’s voice. Minimize the chance of this happening by learning how to use all your equipment in advance. It’s never a good idea to try to figure out the controls on your audio recorder or the operating system on your tablet during an important interview—at best, you’ll be stressed out during the interview and make your interviewee nervous, and at worst you’ll waste the day and have to return for another interview. Make sure you buy or borrow your equipment at least a few days in advance, and stage some test interviews and photo shoots just to get to know your equipment.



Craft stores and other businesses that cater to ethnic communities can be fruitful places to seek folklife interviews. Here fieldworker Peter Bartis interviews a professional at the Yarn and Canvas, a Greek-owned needlework shop in Chicago, in 1977.

Photo by Jonas Dovydenas.

If your recorders, cameras, and computers have clocks that record the date and time, set those accurately before setting out to do fieldwork. That way, the dates and times of your fieldwork will be accurately recorded as part of the digital files. Similarly, some cameras and recorders have GPS technology built in, which tells them where recordings and photos were made and embeds that data in the digital files. Unless there is an ethical reason to turn them off (for example, you're photographing a sacred site whose location the community doesn't want to reveal), GPS coordinates can enhance your data in many ways. Read your users' manuals to find out how to use these features.

Design Release Forms (or Just Use Ours!)

If you plan to use the information from your interviews in publications, podcasts, films, or online presentations (and it's safest to assume you will at some point), it's important to obtain a statement from both the interviewer and interviewee granting permission. The simplest way to do this is to use a standard release form which grants researchers access to the interview and permits its use for non-commercial purposes. Our release form (on page 40) is ready to go for most basic purposes, but if you already know you may want to use the interview in a commercial context, you might need to design your own form by adding language to ours. We recommend you bring two copies of the release form to the interview: one for your files; the other for the interviewees' files. Have both parties sign both copies, and you'll have it all spelled out.

Remember, after the interview, interviewees always have the right to refuse to sign a release form if they have reservations about what was discussed. You can ask them to reconsider, but don't negotiate by introducing promises that aren't on the release form. If the collection and its release forms go to another institution or individual in the future, they're only bound by what it says on the release, not by a promise you made personally. If necessary, negotiate a new release form with terms your interviewee feels comfortable with. And, of course, always remain polite and understanding during such discussions.

Make Contact with Your Interviewees

As a last step before scheduling interviews, you'll want to find out some basic details about your interviewees—you can do this directly with them in person, on the phone, or by email. During those conversations, make sure you explain who you are, why you want to do the interview, and what will happen to the information you collect. (Remember how you created that short statement of purpose? Here's where it comes in handy!)

Schedule Your Interview

Once you've identified an interviewee and had a preliminary conversation or two, you can schedule the interview. Arrange a time when you and the interviewee can have a couple of hours together in a quiet location. This gives time for setting up and for conducting an interview of an hour or a little more.

Create Your Interview Questions

When you know what the topic is, and who you'll be interviewing, it's time to create a list of questions. Begin by brainstorming, and writing down all the questions that it occurs to you to ask. Then edit and refine your questions based on your project's goals and the following principles:

- Keep your questions short and avoid complicated multi-part questions; the interviewee can only answer one thing at a time.
- Never ask questions you don't understand; if you're pretending to know more than you do, your interviewee will probably see through it!
- Avoid questions that can be answered with a "yes" or a "no"; you want their answers to be full of stories and explanations.
- Avoid leading questions or ones that already suggest an answer; your interviewee may give you the answer you seem to want instead of the answer they think is true.
- Don't begin the interview with questions about topics that are controversial within your interviewee's community; it's best to have a rapport with the interviewee before tackling more controversial subjects, and controversy can sometimes cause an interviewee to stop talking altogether!
- Don't worry about pauses. You may be asking about a topic the interviewee hasn't thought about for many years. Give them time to reflect and formulate their response.
- Somewhere between twenty and twenty-five questions is usually a good number for an interview of about an hour. With this in mind, finalize your list. (If you have a lot of questions, bring them all but be aware you may have to schedule a second interview.)

Now you're ready to go into the field!

Going “Into the Field”

Get Used to Writing Fieldnotes

We recommend taking notes throughout the fieldwork process. Notes are the best way to preserve small bits of data which may seem insignificant at the time, but which can take on importance later. At the very least, your notes will provide a useful chronology of your activities. At best, they can be the intellectual core of your project's documentation, preserving your observations and ruminations as the project unfolds. We call a fieldworker's notes “fieldnotes.”

Fieldnotes are particularly important for fieldworkers engaged in participant observation. When you're learning to play the oud from an Egyptian master musician, you can't always record everything that happens at the lesson. When you're being taught to weave complex visual images into a tapestry, or serving food at a community celebration, you can't always be taking photos of that process too. So your notes are often going to be the best record of participant observation.

You should write up a few paragraphs of fieldnotes at the end of every fieldwork day. They should include your impressions of participant observation, as well as such things as general observations about your progress, impressions of your interviewees, summaries of conversations, descriptions of settings, and drawings and diagrams of buildings and artifacts. They should also include information such as the lighting conditions you dealt with during photography or videography, and sources of extraneous sounds picked up by your audio recorder. All this will be useful later, when you're trying to interpret your photos or recordings. A paper notebook can be helpful for sketching and drawing, and also for jotting down notes to yourself during interviews or participant observation, but a tablet or notebook computer is more efficient for writing fieldnotes, since notes you create on a computer will be searchable text.

Get Ready to Record Your Interview (Audio)

On the day of each interview, and especially the first one, it's best to arrive as close as possible to “just on time.” If you show up early, your interviewee may not be ready for visitors. If you show up late, you may not have time to do the whole interview. If traffic or transportation time can vary, this may mean getting to the neighborhood a little early, and then either driving around the block a few times or finding a spot like a park or a coffee shop where you can wait a few minutes. If you're not driving, you can use this time to make last minute adjustments to your interview questions or your equipment.

Before the interview begins, you need to find a spot that will produce a clear recording with no extraneous noises or visual interference (for video recordings).

Obviously, if you're in your interviewee's home, they have control of the space. You should politely ask to use the spot that looks the best, and to turn off any TVs, music, or noisy equipment like fans. It's also a good idea to take out your phone and other devices and say, "I'm just going to turn these off so we don't get interrupted!" If you're lucky, your interviewee will take the hint and do the same!

How do you choose a good spot to record in an unfamiliar location? Avoid noise! Be careful of setting up near a window onto a busy street. Also, try to avoid spots near refrigerators, freezers, air conditioners, furnaces, heat and AC vents, and water heaters. All of these locations might be silent when you arrive and become noisy the second you begin recording.

Plan on recording the voices of both the interviewer and interviewee. Recording the questions, comments, and responses of the interviewer provides context and accounts for the reason and logic behind the responses. Set your microphones as close to the speakers (including yourself) as possible. Lavalier mics are best for one-on-one interviews and should be clipped near the top button of a shirt or blouse—about 6 inches below the chin. If you use a standard microphone, it should be mounted to a stand and placed about 6 to 10 inches from the speakers.



This photo shows a good basic setup for an audio recording with lavalier mics. Fieldworker Dorothy Sara Lee is interviewing emcee Clifford Wolfe, Sr. at the 1983 Omaha Powwow in Macy, Nebraska on August 13, 1983. Omaha Powwow Project collection. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer.



Although we recommend lavalier mics for sit-down interviews, there are many interview situations in which such mics would get in the way. In this photo, Geraldine Johnson interviews Ruth Newman while she cooks in her aunt's home in Galax, Virginia. Blue Ridge Parkway Folklife Project Collection. Photo by Lyntha Scott Eiler.

Before beginning the interview, make sure the recorder is recording. The counter or time code display should tell you it is advancing, while the meters should tell you if the recording levels are good. Many digital recorders can also be set so you can listen to what's being recorded. When they're set on this setting, you can do a mic check at the beginning of the interview and monitor the levels. It's always good to have more than one way to verify that recording is occurring: it's ideal to have a moving counter, levels visible on the meter, and sound in the headphones.

Record and Conduct Your Interview (Audio)

At the start of the recording, make a brief opening statement that specifies the date and place of the interview, the names of the people on the recording, yourself included, and the general topic of the interview. It's best to keep the



There are many venues and opportunities for folklife and oral history interviews today. StoryCorps provides a model in which two people have a conversation in a controlled environment with good recording equipment and technical support. Photo by Rob Lowell.

recording device running throughout the interview, and only turn it off when you're asked to do so or when an interruption requires it.

Careful listening is critical to the interview process. Although you're recording it for later, you need to be listening in the moment, so you can guide the conversation and be sure you've covered the topics you need to cover. Avoid looking at your list of questions too often, or adjusting the equipment unless it's absolutely necessary. Your attention to what the interviewee

is saying not only helps you guide the interview, it encourages the interviewee. Speak directly to the person and respond to statements in an encouraging way. Avoid overusing such expressions as "I see" or "uh-huh" while your interviewee is talking. Although this is polite in everyday conversation, it mars the recording, distracts listeners, and makes it difficult to use the audio for production. Nodding in approval usually works well.

A good interview is one that covers the topic the interviewer wants to know

about, and also records the ideas the interviewee is interested in conveying. So ask the questions you've prepared in advance, but also let the interviewees cover what they think is important. Be flexible, and be prepared to let the interview go in a different direction than you planned.

It's best not to interrupt your informant's answers or thought process. Because of this, it's a good idea to have your pad and pencil handy. If you hear something you want to follow up on, but the interviewee is in the middle of a story, jot it down so you won't forget it. Even if you're more comfortable taking notes on a laptop or tablet, doing so can make it look like you're checking your email or not paying

attention. If you use a pad and pencil, your interviewees will know you're taking notes on what they're saying! When their story or explanation is finished, you can ask immediate follow-up questions such as "When did that happen?" "What are the steps in doing that?" "Can you give me an example of that?" Then peek back at your notes and see if there was anything else: "During that story, you mentioned that you had to bring a ration book to the grocery store. What do you remember about wartime rationing?"



Your interviewees' own photographs are sometimes a useful memory prompt. Here, former towel-factory worker Anne Murphy, of Totowa, New Jersey, is interviewed in her home by fieldworker David Taylor. Murphy is describing a photo of workers (including herself) at Newberger's Towel Factory, in Paterson, ca. 1918. Photo by Martha Cooper.

Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words. Showing your interviewee a photo can spark their memories and sharpen their descriptions. Consider using photographs, maps and other materials to elicit stories and information. If you do so, say clearly on the recording what you're showing your interviewee, identifying the item so you're sure you can find it later.

It's useful to give spoken cues or information so that listeners can understand what is being described in the conversation. For example, if the speaker makes a gesture indicating size or distance, and the recording is audio only, quickly describe what the interviewee is doing.

Interviews can be tiring. We recommend about an hour for a session. If there is a lot more to discuss, it's often best to take a break or schedule a second interview session for another day.

Make a brief closing announcement on the recording at the end of the interview.

After you stop recording, make sure to thank your interviewee for taking the time to help you in your research.

We recommend recording WAV files at 96khz/24bits. Although you can save storage space by recording in mp3 or other compressed formats, these involve a loss of fidelity. Formats that offer lossless compression aren't standard for many archives. These decisions are up to you of course, but the widely-accepted WAV standard at the above resolution works best for major archives such as ours.

Additional Tips for Video

Most of the guidelines we gave above also apply to video documentation. However, the video interview also involves a few other considerations. Video is more complex than audio, so we recommend bringing a teammate to shoot the video. If you can do this, it obviously helps for that person to have videography experience. If you have to do it solo, or if your teammate is inexperienced, here are some tips for a sit-down interview.

For most purposes, it's unnecessary to zoom, pan, or change focus while your interviewee is talking. In fact, it's probably best to video the interview so your interviewee is in a basic, steady head-and-shoulders shot. If the video is



The organization MobileChina 2007 posted this photo on Flickr with a Creative Commons License and the caption "Video ethnography with Chinese students abroad. Interviews with China's best and brightest, undergraduate and graduate students at UC Berkeley, Stanford and SF State."

used in any sort of production later, directors and editors are used to this format—but if you move around a lot, or shoot the video too close up or too wide, it may make it difficult to use the video. To achieve a good shot, you'll want to set up the camera on a tripod so it doesn't move. You'll want to seat your interviewee in a chair that doesn't rock, swivel, or recline, so he or she also doesn't move. Think about lighting when you choose a location: you don't want your interviewee lit from behind, because this causes the video to look washed out. Most of the light should come from the same direction as the camera, or from the side, not into the lens.

Once all this is set up, frame your shot so the interviewee looks good. You can frame your interviewee dead-center, but you should also consider using the “rule of thirds”: our eyes are naturally drawn to the lines one-third of the way from the top, bottom, left, and right of the screen. Thus, the most interesting parts of the shot, such as your subject's eyes, should fall close to the intersections of these lines. To achieve this without being too close up, line up the shot as a head-and-shoulders shot turned to 2/3 or 3/4 profile so that the interviewee's

gaze cuts across the axis of the camera's position and towards the interviewer seated to the left or the right of the camera. The interviewee's eyes should fall one-third of the way down the screen and your interviewee's head and shoulders should fill the right or left 2/3 of the screen. The



Rule of thirds applied to framing Courtland Cox for his Civil Rights History Project interview. See more examples of the principle on the next page.

empty third of the screen should be in front of the interviewee's face, not behind their head. This not only feels natural, it leaves space on the screen for titles if the video is used in production later.

Keep track of how you frame each interview. If you plan to edit the interviews into a film, for visual interest it might be worthwhile to film some of your interviews with the speaker on the left and others with the speaker on the right. You yourself should sit off-camera, in a place so that the shot looks natural if the interviewee is looking at you.

If possible, use a video camera that has separate mic inputs, and use lavalier mics as for an audio recording.

Rule of Thirds: More Examples



In these examples, the first image centers the main subject, while the second employs the “rule of thirds,” in which points of interest such as people’s faces occur one-third of the way from the top and one-third of the way from the side. Note that centering the image can provide basic, stable composition, while the rule of thirds can add visual interest. In photos it is a simple matter to crop images, but for video you will need to frame the shot so it follows the rule of thirds. When framing interview videos, centering works well if you plan to present the whole video for people to watch. A combination approach, in which some are centered and others employ the rule of thirds, works well if you plan to edit clips from the interviews into a longer film.

The first pair of images, by photographer Stephen Winick, shows Steve LaRance performing an invocation at the Library of Congress on May 18, 2016. The second, which is by William Smock, shows AFC fieldworker Carl Fleischhauer with cowboy Myron Smart in Nevada in April, 1980.



Recording on Location

The best on-location recording techniques for art forms like concerts, parades, and weddings are beyond the scope of our advice, but we'll provide some links to further resources on our website at www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/. For purely documentary purposes, it may be worthwhile to just set up your camera on a tripod with the whole performance within the shot. For audio, you could point



Although equipment changed a lot in the half-century between these photos, the basics are the same: a recording device, a microphone, and a set of headphones for monitoring. On top, Joseph S. Hall records a story by 86-year-old Steve Woody, a life-long resident of the Smoky

Mountains, in 1939. This National Park Service photo is also included in Hall's collections at AFC. Hall needed a car on the scene because car batteries were required to power his massive disc recorder. On the bottom, Mary Hufford interviews bluegrass musician Everett Lilly during a 1996 Fourth of July celebration on Kayford Mountain, in West Virginia, as part of the American Folklife Center's Coal River Folklife Project. Photo by Terry Eiler.

two directional microphones toward the performance about 6 inches apart and at a 110-degree angle, or two omnidirectional mics about two feet apart and parallel to one another, or even use a single stereo mic. It may not make for the best audio or video, but reviewing recordings like this can still teach you a lot about the art forms you're studying.

Create Interview Logs

As soon as possible after each interview, it's a good idea to create a log. A log is a time-coded list of the main topics covered in the interview. Just listen to the interview and make a note of when the topic changes. The beginning of a log looks like this:

Identifier: afc2012034_00483

Title: Patrick Bovenzi interview, 2013-02-17

Names: Patrick Bovenzi (interviewee); Ellen E. McHale (interviewer)

Place: Tampa Bay Downs Racetrack kitchen.

Date: 2013-02-17

Description: Patrick Bovenzi talked about his work in the horse business, and especially his current work as a horse identifier.

Language: English

Formats: 1 audio file, digital, WAV (55 min.); 1 video file, digital, sound, color, mpeg4 (55 min.)

Rights: No restrictions, permissions completed.

Tagging: Horses, Racetracks

TIME CODED LOG:

00:10 Originally from Canandaigua, NY, not far from the Finger Lakes Racetrack. He started out walking hots at the Finger Lakes Racetrack when he was 14 years old. He has been in Florida 23 years. He has no other family members in the horse business. He was a kid who always had the Racing Form with him in high school, studying it in High School study hall. He started walking hots in 1968 when he was 14 (he had lied about his age, saying he was 16 years old). He worked at Finger Lakes Racetrack in the summers through high school and college.

1:38 In 1968 he started working for Marty O'Neill, a former jockey turned trainer.

2:10 He worked with the horses during college, worked the horses in the morning and evenings and went to RIT during the day. It took him a little bit longer to finish because of that – 5 years instead of 4. He majored in criminal justice, in the College of General Studies. He learned about law and when he's not a horse identifier, he is a steward so that is relevant to his degree.

4:10 Pat has done everything in the horse business – stable boy to steward: groom, hot walker, assistant trainer, jockey agent, paddock judge, placing judge, patrol judge, clerk of scales, horse identifier. He has been a horse

identifier the longest. There are only 51 horse identifiers in the country. He works with four breeds and is very busy.

5:12 a horse identifier determines the identity of horses. It is his job to determine that each horse entered in a race is the correct one. He checks markings and color. He examines their teeth. He looks at natural markings – legs, cowlicks – and then refers to the registration papers and the tattoo.

6:22 when a horse walks up to him, Pat looks at the horse as he walks up and then he examines her teeth and then the tattoo. It is a quick look.

We recommend creating your log in a word processor or spreadsheet. That will turn your logs into a searchable list of all the topics covered in your interviews. It will come in very handy later, when you need to find information about a specific topic! We also recommend the header information you see above, which contains the same information we'll use later as the essential metadata for keeping track of your interviews. That way, whether you add this metadata to the files first or log the interviews first, you won't have to do this work twice.

While you're listening to the interview, also make note of useful leads to other community members or resources, and identify information that you want to clarify in follow-up interviews.

In some situations, it may be worth your while to produce a full transcript of your interview. This means to type, word-for-word, everything you and your interviewee said during the interview. Transcripts provide searchable text of the entire interview. They also may allow future researchers to understand your interviewees, especially if it took you some time to learn to understand their speech. The goal is to create an accurate and understandable text. You don't have to include every utterance like "um," or every stutter, but try to reproduce as closely as possible the speaker's words. Remember, no matter how thorough and accurate transcripts may be, they are never able to capture tones of voice like an audio recording, or facial expressions like a video recording. On the other hand, they're easily accessible and text-searchable, and require no playback equipment. Transcribing can be time-consuming; it takes between six and twelve hours to transcribe one hour of an interview, plus additional time if you edit the transcript afterwards.

Taking Still Photos

If you're studying a genre that is primarily visual (like folk art) or material (like food, furniture, landscape, architecture, boats, etc.), then still photos become an important tool as well.

As with audio and video recorders, use the highest-quality camera available to you. The higher the pixel resolution the better, since high resolution allows you to crop your images and enlarge details. This is especially important if books, presentations, or exhibits may result from your fieldwork. Set your camera to capture and save your files as unprocessed, uncompressed "raw" data files (file extensions vary by camera model, e.g., nef, dcr), rather than processed image files, such as tiffs and jpegs. If you can't shoot in raw, use the highest resolution, least compressed image settings your camera is capable of achieving.

In addition to the camera, carry batteries, charger, and spare memory card. If you intend to shoot in low light conditions and can't use a flash, a tripod can hold the camera steady enough for longer exposures, and some lenses are better than others for this as well.

Get to know your camera for a while before using it for fieldwork. Cameras can have complex controls and features, and it's no fun trying to figure out how to adjust it for lower light while the concert you're trying to shoot proceeds without you! Practice using your camera in various light conditions and with various subjects. Try stationary, posed shots and candid shots of people moving around. The more you practice, the more comfortable you'll be in the field.

When you're photographing during your interview visits, some shots should include your interviewee's everyday home or work surroundings. They should show, for example, the household, the use of space, and the decorations in their homes. You should also photograph details of the environment relevant to your research: a workshop if you're studying a person who makes musical instruments, or a home shrine if you're studying religious traditions. It's always good to take a few flattering portrait shots of your interviewees and maybe even a shot or two with their whole family. Pictures like this are useful in introducing your interviewees to the public in later presentations of your work, and they also make great gifts to give back to them!

If you're shooting during a performance, process, or event, take enough pictures to document it fully. If you're documenting the creation of a chair, for example, try to photograph each step in the process. If you're photographing a musical performance, wide shots showing the whole band are important to establish context, and it's also ideal to get close-ups of each prominent singer and each instrument being played. Try especially hard to photograph unusual instruments, dance moves, and playing techniques. If you're documenting a wedding, photograph every person in the wedding party and every step in the ceremony if you can.

If you are photographing at an event where there are official photographers, don't get in their way. However, it's OK to ask for their card and, with the permission of the host of the event, contact them later about using their photos. When shooting photos, remember the "rule of thirds": it's often good for the most interesting spots on your photo to be a third of the way from the top, bottom, left, or right, rather than dead center. See pages 23-24 for examples.

To conserve disk space, you can always discard photos that didn't come out well as you go along. However, keep in mind that your primary purpose is documentary rather than aesthetic. A photo that doesn't look so great, but that documents exactly how a garment moves during dancing, can be as useful later as a great portrait of the dancer's face. Discard photos that are out of focus, blurry, or too light or dark, as well as photos that you're sure aren't useful in telling your story. Caption photos as soon as possible following the interview or the event while your memory is still fresh.

Documenting Objects, Buildings, and Landscapes

If your project is about buildings, landscapes, or objects, a good starting place is a set of photographs. It's also best to conduct an interview with the owner or maker of the object, or with someone knowledgeable about the building or landscape. In the interview, try to find out such details as its uses, its significance to the community, what materials it's made of, its component parts, the date of its creation, any modifications people have made to it since then, and the names of its designer, maker, and current and past owners.

If you're documenting buildings, the most accurate form of documentation is formal, properly executed measured drawings. Unfortunately, most of us would need the services of an architect or draftsman to produce the real thing. However, for the purposes of many projects, you can create serviceable drawings with the help of another fieldworker or two. You can then supplement



Steel measuring tape is still your best bet for accurate measurements of buildings. Other tapes stretch slightly, so the longer the item you're measuring the less accurate they become. In this photo, fieldworker Howard W. Marshall takes a building's measurements. South-Central Georgia Folklife Project, 1977. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer.

these drawings with photos of both the interior and exterior. The National Park Service has a good set of guidelines for this, covering both drawings and photographs of historic buildings. You also might want to check if the building has already been documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey. You can find links to both the guidelines and the collection of historic documentation on our online resources page: www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/

On buildings and landscape elements, take bigger measurements with a steel measuring tape if you can. Small measurements might require a smaller ruler. If you want to get fancy, you can also use a profile gauge to record the shapes of moldings.

When you're measuring a building or site, it's best to go with three people: two to handle the tape and ruler and to call out measurements, and the other to write them down. It's difficult to measure large surfaces on your own, so it's good to have one person at each end of the measuring tape. It's even harder to switch between the measuring tape and the notebook to write the measurements down. Because of this, a single fieldworker will probably have trouble doing this efficiently, but you could manage it with two.

To ensure you can match up the measurements with the part of the building they represent, it's helpful to sketch the feature in your field notebook first. Then, as your partner calls out the measurements, write them down next to corresponding parts of the sketch. After sketching and measuring, shoot your photos. Later, you can do your best to transform the measurements, photos, and sketches into measured drawings on graph paper or digital illustrations.

You should also supplement the drawings and photos of the building itself with inventories of furnishings, along with sketches or photos of their placement. If particular artifacts found within the structure or on its property are significant, document them too. See our sample "Building Documentation" form online at www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork

Let the Project Guide You

Our final piece of advice on fieldwork itself is to let the project guide you. Sometimes, we go into the field with one idea in mind, but the interviewees we meet turn out to have a strong interest in another folklife topic. If you've been subtly guided toward a different focus by your interviewees, it may be worth considering a shift in topic. Or you may decide to make it your next project!



Preserving and Presenting Your Results

When you're done with your fieldwork, you'll likely have a large number of digital files in several categories (audio, video, photos, and word processing documents). You'll also have paper items of various kinds. Now is the time to get them all ready for long-term storage.

Care for Your Paper Files

If you took our suggestion and created a filing system in advance, your paper files should already be in folders. But there are still a few things you can do to improve the collection. For example, remove paper clips, rubber bands, and other fasteners, which may result in damage and rust or leave sticky substances on your materials. Then, store your material in a cool dry place, away from overhead water pipes and areas where there is a risk of fire or flood. Finally, consider scanning some of your paper items and preserving them as part of your digital collection.

Describe your Digital Collection through the Magic of Metadata (Also: What Is Metadata?)

Our digital files consist of data: bits and bytes of binary information, which computers can decipher into audio, video, pictures, and words. But there's also information ABOUT that information, telling us when and where it was created, how it has been changed, and who has changed it. That data about our data is called "metadata."

Each of your digital objects needs metadata for discovery and access. Your announcement on the recording and your recording and photo logs have already captured some metadata. If you've followed our advice and set the time and date on your equipment, more of your metadata will already be in good shape: the date and time on which you created your files, for example, is automatically embedded in the files. If you also followed our advice about file naming, you have files already named in a way that makes the collection easy to navigate. But there is other metadata, too, that can help you and later researchers find your way around the collection.

We recommend a format known as Dublin Core for recording metadata about fieldwork files. An online tool to generate Dublin Core metadata and a simple spreadsheet in the Dublin Core format are available from our online resources page: www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/

We recommend that you record descriptive tags (known as “descriptors”) about each of your files. Good descriptions recorded in a spreadsheet can be reused for online presentations and for cataloging once your collection goes to an archive or library. Therefore, a spreadsheet is by far the best way to keep this information. But you can use a word processing document instead, or even a paper notebook, if you’re old-school!

Essential descriptors answer the questions what, who, where, and when. For each file, enter the filename into your spreadsheet, and then record the following information about it:

- **Identifier.** Each digital object requires a unique identifier. Filenames are subject to change, so create a scheme for identifying your photographs, audio files and video files.
Example: NVFA_CDPDP2012_HP08_PH10 is a unique identifier which includes repository NVFA (Northern Virginia Folklife Archive); Project name (CDPDP2012) Columbia Pike Documentary Project 2012); fieldworker’s initials and interview number HP08, (Hillary Pearson’s eighth interview session); and media type and number PH10 (digital photograph number 10).
- **Title.** Include factual content about who, when, what, and where. Groups of photographs can share the same title.
Example 1: Huxley residence, Boone, NC. Kitchen, 2015-12-21
Example 2: Iryna Wolynetz interview conducted by Stephen Winick, 2015-02-27
- **Names of participants.** (Include year of birth, if possible.) Ask what name each person prefers and how to spell it. Include the “role” of the participants, such as interviewer, interviewee, collector, photographer, singer, or person depicted.
Example: Eudokia Sorochaniuk (b. 1919), interviewee; Stephen Winick (b. 1968), interviewer.
- **Place of recording.**
Example: 1234 Street Road, Pennsauken, NJ, USA
- **Date of recording or capture.** Use the format YYYY-MM-DD (Even if your recording device captures date and time, manually record dates in a separate field in the spreadsheet.)
Example: 2004-08-23

- **Description/Summary.** Describe the interview in a brief sentence or paragraph.
Example 1: One-hour interview with Iryna Wolynetz at the Ukrainian Museum about Ukrainian textiles, including weaving and Hutsul nyzanka embroidery.
Example 2: Photo of Mr. Lieburn’s barn, Lancaster, PA. (Note: if a photo caption includes all the significant details, then you don’t need to repeat them here, but add descriptive details about content and context if important.)
- **Language.** Describe language(s) and dialect(s) of your interviewees, especially if you are using a translator or are not familiar with the language.
Example: Spanish, South Bolivian Quechua
- **Format or physical description.** Description of the digital files, video, audio, or photos you have captured, and/or of any analog materials you’ve collected, e.g., color slides, photographic prints, clippings, pamphlets, posters, etc.
Example: 1 audio file (32 min.), digital, WAV (96 kHz, 24 bit)
- **Rights.** Note if there are any restrictions placed on the use of the photos and interviews. You should also note if permission forms have been completed.
- **Keywords.** Keywords are important topics or subjects covered in your interviews and photos and can help retrieve information after they are recorded. Keywords are “uncontrolled,” meaning that whatever topics or words you decide to add can come from any source. Some communities have specific words they use to describe their traditions, and it is important to include these local keywords in your descriptions.

Control Your Vocabulary! In addition to keyword tagging, it can be valuable to tag your interviews with terms from a “controlled vocabulary” such as the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, which you can find on our online resources page: www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/ . If you use a controlled vocabulary, people will be able to find your materials more easily on the web or in an archive.

Photo description example

Title: Parade at West Indian carnival, Brooklyn, NY, 2010-09-04

Names: Stephen Winick (b. 1968), photographer. Richard Evans (b. 1975, person depicted)

Place: Eastern Parkway and Schenectady Ave., Brooklyn, NY

Date: 2010-09-04

Description: Richard Evans in a yellow and black sequined bee costume in the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn, N.Y. on September 4, 2010. He later described making the costume and pre-parade activities with other participants.

Language: After the parade, Richard Evans provided some descriptions of the event in Spanish.

Format: 10 photographs, digital, color, NEF

Rights: No restrictions on use. Please credit the photographer. Permissions completed.

Tagging: Costumes, parades, Caribbean Americans

Interview description example

Title: Betty Sweeny interview conducted by Stephen Winick, 2014-08-23

Names: Stephen Winick (b. 1968), interviewer; Betty Sweeny (b. 1945), interviewee.

Place: Betty Sweeny's home, 1234 Street Road, Pennsauken, NJ, USA

Date: 2014-08-23

Description: Betty Sweeny described her work as a taxidermist, including early instruction from her father, people's attitudes about taxidermy, new techniques, tools used, her photography and marketing of her work.

Language: English

Formats: 1 audio file, digital, WAV (55 min.); 1 video file, digital, sound, color, mpeg4 (55 min.)

Rights: No restrictions, permissions completed.

Tagging: Taxidermy, wildlife, anatomy, occupations, photographers, oral histories



This photo is an example of how important accurate metadata can be. It's a frame of motion-picture film shot by Alan Lomax in 1942, and labeled as "Charles Edwards." Almost 70 years later, AFC staff members learned it was actually David "Honeyboy" Edwards. After this film was shot, Honeyboy went on to be a crucial figure in country blues, a Grammy Award winner and recognized pioneer. Until this film was rediscovered, it was thought that no image of Honeyboy existed from before the late 1960s. Many books and films have been made about Lomax and Edwards, and they all could have benefited from this footage, but no one knew it existed—because an archivist wrote down one name wrong.

Care for Your Digital Collection

To keep your files safe, we recommend that you make three copies of your files on hard drives. We recommend you keep one in a different physical location from the others. Store all your drives in a stable and protected environment with moderate humidity and temperature, and without strong electrical or magnetic fields nearby. Finally, we recommend you migrate your files to new storage devices every 5 years or so.

Decide How the Collection Can (and Should) Be Used

Now that you have a great collection of fieldwork documentation, and you've seen to its physical safety, it's time to decide what to do with it. If you went into the field with a production goal in mind, like a podcast, film, book, or exhibit, you'll need to assess whether your collection fits the bill. If you didn't

have a goal, it's time to think about these options!

If you still don't want to do any production with the collection, the second question is whether others might be interested in your work. If the collection is



Larry Fremin is interviewed by Jocelyn Donlon in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Photo by Jon Donlon, courtesy of Louisiana Folklife.

purely personal or family-related, you might want to hold onto it privately. But if it documents a folklife topic interesting to the wider community, why not make it accessible to scholars and other parties? The best way to do so is to approach an archive or library about donating the collection.

Because the digital world moves quickly, and file types evolve, in the long term your collection is better off in

the care of professional archivists, especially if they are experienced in working with digital collections. They can store it on servers, with software that checks for data loss and file corruption. They can also convert to new file types and formats as technology evolves in the future. If you think your collection is worth preserving, we recommend exploring this option. (In most cases, since your collection is digital, you'll be able to keep copies, so your own access won't be affected at all by donating it to an archive!)

Think about ethics one more time. Did your interviewees express serious concerns about outsiders hearing about their traditions? Were people reluctant to sign the



A staffer from the Office of Senator Joe Donnelly (IN) interviews a Persian Gulf War veteran at the Hamilton East Public Library, August 25, 2014.

release forms? Did you promise at any time to keep anything "off the record?" If so, you might need to place restrictions on your collection, or withhold items when you donate the collection. Still, it would be worth talking to an archive to see what they recommend. If you didn't encounter any of these issues, we certainly hope you'll consider a library or archive.

Get Your Collection Ready for an Archive

If you have followed our advice on file types, file naming, and metadata, your collection is likely to be nearly ready for an archive to accept. However, every archive and library has its own standards and procedures for accessioning collections. Therefore, if you haven't been in touch with an archive or library yet, your best bet is to talk to institutions where you'd like your collection to be housed, and get from them their own archival standards. You can then adjust your files or metadata to fit their needs. Keep in mind that archives have their own policies about whether or not to accept collections, and can decline your offer.

Once you have determined how to keep your collection safe for the long term, whether at home or in an archive, it's time to celebrate! Your fieldwork project is complete!

Public Sector Folklore and Folklife Programs

Just like folklife, folklorists are everywhere if you know where to look! Since the formation of the American Folklore Society in 1888, folklorists have been organized into a scholarly discipline to study traditional culture. But many folklorists have moved beyond academia, to bring their work before the general public.

Nearly every state has a program for documenting and presenting its own folk cultural heritage, and most hire trained professionals. Folklorists organize concerts, festivals, exhibits, and other cultural heritage programs. We create reports and recommendations related to urban planning, cultural sustainability, and economic development. We develop archives, encourage community scholarship, prepare school curricula and teacher training programs, and organize folk arts residencies in schools, libraries, and museums.

Folklorists are also concerned with the sustainability of folk traditions. We work to help fund folk arts through grants and by establishing community resources at arts centers, libraries, and museums. We create programs to help folk artists find apprentices, and help pay for their services as teachers, so that folk traditions can continue to be passed on. We provide performance and exhibit opportunities for folk artists through a wide range of public programs. Folklorists design, implement and manage "folk artists in the schools" programs, oral history projects, museum programs and broad scale documentation projects. If you are interested in securing the services of a folklorist, or interested in learning more about the profession, contact the American Folklife Center. We can refer you to local, state, regional, and federal folklife programs, and to relevant universities. We even have an internship program! Contact the Center at folklife@loc.gov

Online Resources

Visit us online. You'll find sample forms such as audio and video logs, photo logs, and building documentation forms. In most cases, you will want to enter this information into spreadsheets rather than paper forms, but the forms will give you a good idea of what information to create or capture. You'll also find links to resources from other agencies, such as the National Park Service and the Historic American Buildings Survey, as well as other useful guidelines for folklife and oral history fieldwork. And, of course, a pdf version of this guide! Find it all at www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork

Plus, find more folklife resources and a wealth of online collections at www.loc.gov/folklife



Cover Credits

Photo 1: Dallas Chief Eagle performs at the Library of Congress on November 15, 2007. Photo by Michaela McNichol, LC Office of Communications.

Photo 2: Dorothy Sara Lee interviews Clifford Wolfe Sr. at the 1983 Omaha pow-wow. Macy, Nebraska, August 13, 1983. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer. AFC 1986/038: FCP/0-CF3A-6.

Photo 3: A patron at the Yarn and Canvas craft supply store, Chicago, Illinois, April 21, 1977. Photo by Jonas Dovydenas. AFC 1981/004: 13.

Photo 4: Former AFC Director Alan Jabbour and John R. Griffin in Lennox, Georgia, August 6, 1977. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer. AFC 1982/010.

Photo 5: Bing Xia plays the guzheng at the Library of Congress on May 21, 2015. Photo by Shawn Miller, LC Office of Communications.

Page 7 Credits

Top: Frank Gavica with button accordion, Paradise Valley, Nevada, October 1979. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer. AFC 1991/021: NV9-CF32-9.

Middle: Children playing "ring around a rosie" in Chicago, Illinois, April 1941. Photo by Edwin Roskam. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USF33- 005164-M1.

Bottom: Nepalese Dancer. Photographer unknown. AFC 2011/002.

RELEASE FORM

I, _____, am a participant in the _____ project, (hereinafter "project"). I understand that the purpose of the project is to collect audio- and video-tapes and selected related documentary materials (such as photographs and manuscripts) that may be deposited in the permanent collections of _____. The deposited documentary materials may be used for scholarly, educational, and other purposes. I understand that the _____ plans to retain the product of my participation as part of its permanent collection and that the materials may be used for exhibition, publication, presentation on the World Wide Web and successor technologies, and for promotion of the institution and its activities in any medium.

I hereby grant to _____ ownership of the physical property delivered to the institution and the right to use the property that is the product of my participation (for example, my interview, performance, photographs, and written materials) as stated above. By giving permission, I understand that I do not give up any copyright or performance rights that I may hold.

I also grant to _____ my absolute and irrevocable consent for any photograph(s) provided by me or taken of me in the course of my participation in the project to be used, published, and copied by _____ and its assignees in any medium.

I agree that _____ may use my name, video or photographic image or likeness, statements, performance, and voice reproduction, or other sound effects without further approval on my part.

ACCEPTED AND AGREED

Signature _____
Date _____
Printed name _____
Address _____
_____ Zip _____ - _____
Telephone () _____ - _____
Fax () _____ - _____
Email _____

Note: for further examples of release forms, see our online resources at:

www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/



LIBRARY OF
CONGRESS

loc.gov/folklife