

Boise State University

ScholarWorks

IPS/BAS 495 Undergraduate Capstone Projects

Student Research

Summer 2023

Oral Histories of the Silver Valley in Northern Idaho

Bobbie-Jo Stepro Bighill

Boise State University

—

Oral Histories of the Silver Valley in Northern Idaho

Bobbie-Jo Stepro Bighill

Boise State University

Margaret Sass, J.D., Ed.D

Summer 2023

Authors Note

Interdisciplinary Studies at Boise State University

bobbiejobighill@u.boisestate.edu

Abstract

The purpose of my capstone project is to preserve the oral histories of the people who grew up in the Silver Valley of Northern Idaho. It was once an area known as the Silver Capital of the world. More Silver was produced in the small towns in this area nestled between the Connection of Highway 3 and the Montana border on I-90. It earned its name as the Silver Capital of the world before most of the mines closed in the 1980s. At that time, they had produced more Silver than anywhere else in the world. Now there are several of the towns that are lost and the rest are turning into ghost towns. Who will remember the history of this once proud area? Through the oral histories of those raised in the area before 1990, we can preserve the history through those that lived here in their own words and voices. Baylor Institute for Oral Histories says, "Oral history enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their voices, through their understanding of what happened and why" (Baylor Institute, 2012). This will serve as a historical piece legacy for members of the families of the interviewees, and personalized historical additions. I feel that hearing family stories in the voice of a distant ancestor could be comforting to the listener. The importance of this project raises daily as more and more of that generation pass away leaving us with no way to reclaim their stories. It is a history that can never be reclaimed.

Keywords: Oral, History, Idaho, Mining, Culture, Scandal

Introduction

My inspiration for this project was a love of the Silver Valley where I grew up. I had the privilege of living here when it was much more populated and prosperous than it is today. This little piece of heaven isn't what it used to be, but it is still a community of hardworking people that take care of each other and have pride in the beautiful area we call home. Each year we have people that die that take with them the memories of the way of life here that is gone.

There is a quote that explains the importance of oral histories. It is, "When an old person dies a library burns to the ground" (Baillargeon et al.,2022). We lose the ability to hear the voice of that community member and learn from their stories. According to the Smithsonian, "Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information – primary source material – from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews" (Smithsonian, 2020). This was what I wanted to do for the area I love. I wanted to preserve their voices for their families, preserving them for future generations and historians, but mostly to remember a way of life that no longer exists.

My project began with researching how to collect oral histories. I researched to find out if oral histories were important, and why. I also needed to research the best way to handle the interview for collecting oral histories. In addition, I also needed a release form, which I found on the Smithsonian Oral History website (Smithsonian, n.d.). I started with the question of either I create an oral history compilation of growing up in the Silver Valley or create an oral history to record the history of the town's past corruption. There has been a lot of information recorded on the corruption of these small towns. Instead, I would create an oral history that would record oral histories about growing up in the Silver Valley, which ended up bringing in some discussion about past corruption.

Once I began the oral histories, I had to change my original plan of how to make them available to the greatest number of people. I let the problem percolate in the back of my mind, allowing my new problem-solving skill to work. I ended up designing a Google site that allowed

me to add the oral history links, which are housed on Youtube with backups I keep, photo archives, and the podcast I had done giving a much better experience to people looking for historical information on the Silver Valley.

Elements Coming Together

Innovative Approach

The project brings a personalized telling of the history of the Silver Valley. The stakeholders will be able to listen to the oral histories of the area. They will continue to add to the history, they will add a personal reflection of the everyday life of everyday people that is often missed by written history. I involved the Barnard Stockbridge Museum to assist me in making the project a successful one. This approach was innovative in that it will take the oral histories of people that remember areas that are now ghost towns or have declining populations, and bring them back to life through the voice of someone who was there.

Emotional Intelligence

I took the time to think about each of my stakeholders and what they would need from this project. I used this view to analyze how to best interview people, preserve history, and make it accessible to everyone. I needed to use my empathy to see what I needed to provide to each one of them. I also had to look for ways to preserve the history in a way that it could be updated as technology changes, and it could be passed on to new caretakers in the future. It is an awareness of myself and others that helped me look at how all of these things could be done in the best interests of my stakeholders.

Creative Thinking

The creative framework has been an important piece of this project. I had to decide how to limit the project. I decided that one town wouldn't show the whole picture, because although there are several towns in the area they have an interconnection that is vital to who we are as a community. The people in this valley are connected by tragedy, history, and culture. I decided to include anyone who grew up in the Silver Valley before 1990. I started with three people who

were willing to tell their stories. I then worked to decide how it would be recorded, stored, and made available. I came up with utilizing a Google Site, which is free and very easy to set up. It is a website published on Google's platform. This solution keeps it from just being available in a museum. This will make these histories available to anyone who wants to know more about this historical area. I felt that this unique way to share the information makes it available to everyone.

Innovative Solution

It was important to me that this information was available to everyone. It was a key piece that separated my project from others. I needed them to be able to be upgraded easily as technology changes. I found out in my research that there have been oral histories done in the past, but they can't be accessed because the recordings are breaking down, because reel-to-reel recordings need to be stored properly. That wasn't the fate I wanted for mine. I was looking at the big picture and the future of my collected oral histories. I want the site to continue to be added to for generations to come.

Results

My results were better than I could have hoped. The three that I interviewed all gave me great feedback. Charlie Mooney gave me the names of more people he thought should be added, and asked me to put his interview online for him (Bighill, Charles Mooney, 2023). Jack Hoffman provided me with more people I should contact for their histories (Bighill, Jack Hoffman, 2023). Bruce Flohr was happy with the results and asked to see the completed site so he could share it (Bighill, Bruce Flohr, 2023). I shared the start with Tammy Copeland, the curator of the Barnard Stockbridge Museum, and 5 other people. They told me that they found the site easy to use, and were excited to share it with others. Their interest and excitement about this project is what I used to measure my project's success.

I have already seen an impact on my stakeholders. The way the interviewees responded gives me the first impression of how it will affect my stakeholders. My discussion

with the curator of the Barnard Stockbridge Museum, Tammy Copeland, also shows a favorable result. There is the desire to begin sharing it. The few people that I have also shared the site have also been excited to have access to it. There have been others that have heard about the project and have asked me for site access. The fact it is being talked about through word of mouth shows it to be a successful project, by recording the stories that will enhance the understanding of the history of the Silver Valley for years to come.

Conclusion

I had anticipated a project that would be a positive historical piece for future generations. I wanted something that would give a voice to anyone. It would allow people to see how everyday people lived in this area. I anticipated that it would be stored in a cloud account with access given to the local museums so that people would be able to access it. I wanted to make it accessible.

What I produced was better than I had hoped. I used creativity, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving to make a site that could be shared with everyone. I have a backup in case something happens to the histories that were put on Youtube and linked to my Google site. In my original plan, there wasn't a site where I could link all the historical sites in one place. This has given me the ability to add my podcast from another Boise State University writing course and give people that want to add their voices a way to contact me.

In the future, I want to add links to the photo libraries of the Silver Valley area. I also want to create a QR code for the ease of sharing the site. I am hoping to make up cards. I will take the cards to local museums. This will make it easier for the site to be used by more people. I plan to continue recording oral histories. I have 6 more people lined up to be interviewed. I also plan on recording additional historical podcasts, which will also be added to this site.

I learned so much during this project. Knowing what I do now, I would have started with Google Sites and a more extensive list of interview questions. My first interview was too short

at about 15 minutes, which required me to revise my questions for future interviews. I was happy with my open-ended questions but wanted to stay in about the one-hour range.

I feel that my service learning project will impact generations to come. They will be able to hear the stories of their great-grandparents in their voice. I think back to my grandfather that was killed in the mine before I was born and how much it would have meant to me to be to hear a historical memory in his voice. This project will give much to many for years to come, by giving a voice, and personal information to the historical record. Most of us aren't famous, but our stories are important for what it was like to live everyday life as an everyday person.

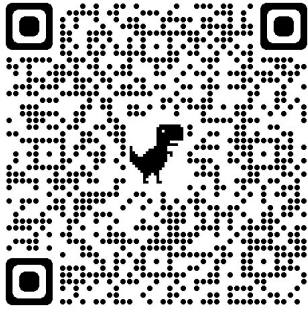
References

- Baillargeon, D., Hunnicutt, A., Kosc, G., Milson, A., Montgomery, E., Sandy, J., Saxon, G., Travis, C., Cole, S., Breuer, K., Palmer, S. W., & Blakeslee, B. (2022, September 22). *Oral history and the historical process*. How History is Made A Students Guide to Reading Writing and Thinking in the Discipline.
<https://uta.pressbooks.pub/historicalresearch/chapter/oral-history/>
- Baylor Institute for Oral Histories. (2012). *Understanding oral history: Why do it? -Baylor University*. Baylor Institute for Oral Histories.
<https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/66420.pdf>
- Bighill, B.-J. S. (2023a, July 10). Charles Mooney Oral History. personal.
- Bighill, B.-J. S. (2023b, July 15). Bruce Flohr Oral History. personal.
- Bighill, B.-J. S. (2023c, July 15). Jack Hoffman. personal.
- Smithsonian Institute. (n.d.). *Interview release form - smithsonian institution*. Smithsonian Institute. https://folklife-media.si.edu/docs/folklife/interviewing_guide/InterviewReleaseForm.pdf
- Smithsonian Institution Archives. (2020, May 7). *How to do oral history*. Smithsonian Institution Archives. <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/how-do-oral-history>

Appendix

<https://sites.google.com/view/silvervalleyhisory?usp=sharing>

The completed site for the Oral Histories of the Silver Valley.



This QR code can be used to share the site.