

Why include Oral History?

Here's a note about the importance of oral histories to the Out in Alaska project:

As we worked to define our project and the contents of our website, we were fortunate to have the help of David Reamer, an award-winning historian here in Alaska. David wrote the training manual for our volunteer oral history interviewers, and the following is a preface to that material:

“To begin, it is essential to know why we are using oral history for this project. Not only is it crucial that you believe in oral history as an information-gathering technique, but you must also be able to defend it when pressed, perhaps even by your interview subjects.

-Some people might say, Isn't oral history just the random memories of some biased individual?

-Some academics today believe oral history is a lesser form of historical documentation - that an oral history account is a lesser form of evidence than a report or newspaper article. I have personally experienced this.

-But consider, did other forms of historical documentation commonly cover 2SLGBT+ issues? As regards Alaska, newspapers and publishers did not regularly cover the 2SLGBT+ community, with exceptions most notably coming after tragedies or in ways that negatively depicted the community.”

And here is an additional reason for oral history's importance to the project:

Daniel James Brown, *is an award-winning and bestselling author, as well as the recipient of the 2025 Stephen E. Ambrose Oral History Award from Rutgers Living History Society – May 2025. His works include *Facing the Mountain: A True Story of Japanese American Heroes in World War II* and *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*.*

“At its heart, I'd like to make a point of today. In this time we are living through, when history—factual history—is under assault, when books are banned for ideological reasons, when uncomfortable narratives are suppressed, when false historical narratives are promoted for political reasons, facts and the truth have never been so important.

Now we all know that oral histories themselves are not always factual. They may be riddled with mis-remembering, with conflation, and with the speaker's own agenda or biases. And so the honest writer's task is to hold those first-hand accounts up to the light, to test them against other sources of information, to discern what is and isn't true. The writer must discard what is untrue, but at the same time recognize that just

because an account may be in part be untrue that same account may, and often does, contain emotional truths that must not be discarded, that are in fact the most valuable parts of the account. For history has to be more than the telling of facts. It must also capture the human element, the truths that transcend the facts and speak directly to the human heart.

Only the eyewitness who has lived through a true firestorm can really know and therefore tell us what it is like to see and hear a tornado of fire rip through one's hometown. Only someone who has been snowbound and come to the very edge of starvation can convey to us what that feels like. Only someone who has won an Olympic gold medal can share that level of exultation with us. And only someone who has watched her grandmother being taken away and incarcerated in a bleak concentration camp can move us to understand her pain."