

## Chapter 1 – Oral History Example

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**John Erling (JE):** This is John Erling, founder of the oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com. As we collect voices and stories for Voices of Oklahoma, we always encourage you to record your family stories. You'll be glad you did and so will your family and future generations.

Now I'm going to use my own experience as an example as to how meaningful this whole exercise can be.

I am the grandson of four Norwegian immigrants. My mother's parents settled in Minnesota, my father's in North Dakota.

My grandparents homesteaded in 1894, receiving 160 acres from the federal government. My father would tell stories about how his dad built a dugout, then a log cabin, then two frame houses — each one taken in a tornado and a fire — and then built the final house which still stands. So, it would be fun to hear him tell that story, right?

My dad died in 1991; he was 88. But in the late '80s, I recorded him telling this story, and I had no idea I would be in the oral history business.

Now, by living in a Norwegian community, my grandmother never learned to speak English. All her friends spoke Norwegian and the activities of the Lutheran Church she attended were conducted in Norwegian. So, my father spoke English at school but Norwegian at home.

So listen now to my father tell this story.

My father, John Arnt Frette, with his Norwegian accent...

**John Frette (JF):** When my father came across alone, before he was married, he came across on the boat. And then he came to Grand Forks — and then he went south to Grand Forks, 13 miles. And there he made application for

land there. He had to live on the place six months of the year. So he stayed there during the Summer and then when Fall comes he went back to Norway.

Then the next Spring he came back again and he built the house. Now it was all prairie around there and here comes a prairie fire and burns the house down. The next Fall he went back to Norway again; comes back and he built the second house — and the tornado took that one.

Then he put up a log house and that stayed. That stayed until they tore it down when they built the other house.

The first summer he was there, he dug a hole in the ground and threw a cover over it, you know? Just like a roothouse. He stayed in there and slept in there.

**JE:** So as of this year, 2024, my father will have been deceased 33 years.

Now, I hope you can imagine how much fun it is to hear my dad's voice. Unless we record our family's stories, we will forget the sound of our father, mother, grandparents, and the stories will fade away — as do the voices; and I do not remember my mother's voice.

I hope this example will prompt you to record the stories of your family, many of them perhaps handed down from past generations.

My parents spoke Norwegian when they didn't want my brother or I to know what they were talking about. I just know a few phrases in Norwegian, so I will simply say: "God dag," which means "Good day."

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