

## Learning Goals

Grades: 9–12

**American history:** the causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs

**Historical understanding:** multiple points of view, objectivity versus subjectivity, reliability and validity, corroboration

**Technology:** select and use appropriate tools to accomplish tasks



# Collecting History



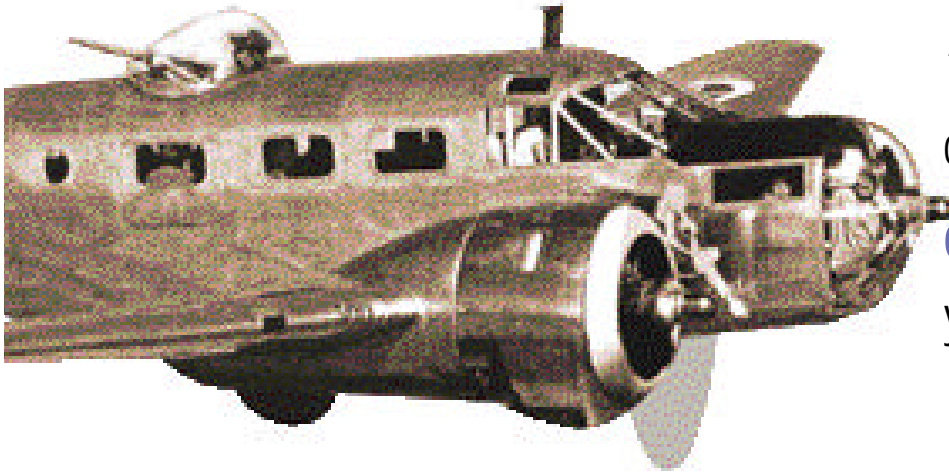
How collecting the oral history of local WWII veterans helped a teacher meet standards and connect his students to history and their community.

by Jeff Carter

Every student who walks through the door of Central Alternative High School in Dubuque, Iowa, is academically at-risk, having failed to achieve success in traditional settings at the area's three other high schools. Knowing this, history teacher John Adelman faces the challenge of coming up with alternative approaches that will engage these reluctant learners and still meet the school district's academic standards. Typically, his practice is to dispense with the textbook altogether in favor of student-led, project-based activities that incorporate oral history and other primary-source research with unique community-service activities. "The key," he explains, "is to come up with projects that the students can buy into, where you inspire them to say, 'Yeah, let's do that—this is going to be cool!'"

But even Adelman, who has been honing this approach for more than 20 years, has been stunned by the success of his students' most recent projects. In 1997–98, a research project on the Tuskegee Airmen—the African American fighter pilot squadron of World War II—led to a research book and a visit to Dubuque by some of the actual Tuskegee veterans for a public seminar organized by Central Alternative students. That project led, in turn, to an ambitious World War II oral-history project during the 1999–2000 academic year, in which students interviewed local WWII veterans and others about their experiences during the war. They published their findings in a professionally published book, co-sponsored a vintage aircraft show at the Dubuque Regional Airport, and coordinated yet another successful seminar, which included an appearance by Brig. General Paul Tibbets, pilot of the B-29 *Enola Gay* and commander of the atomic strike mission to Hiroshima in August 1945.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN BARTH



“Oral-history projects complement the content or skills reinforcement you want to teach.”

Adelmann selects a basic project topic ahead of time, but then he lets the students take control of the direction of their own research. For example, after introducing the Tuskegee project to his students (with a screening of the HBO film *The Tuskegee Airmen*), he provided them with a basic set of suggested print and electronic research resources, and phone numbers of former airmen who had agreed to be interviewed. Then he asked his students to select their own areas of research, based on their interests. Adelmann is primarily concerned that his students learn how to do basic research and write an effective paper, whatever the subject happens to be. The Tuskegee Airmen may seem like a fairly narrow topic, but Adelmann’s approach encourages his students to pursue a far-ranging variety of related topics. “A good portion of our Tuskegee Airmen book has nothing directly to do with the Tuskegee Airmen,” he notes, “but it branches out into other areas of American history.”

Adelmann also feels strongly about making community connections, whether it’s learning from local citizens or giving something back to the community in the form of a book, a presentation, or some kind of performance-based project. This element was particularly prominent in the WWII project he initiated after the Tuskegee project. This time the focus was on local oral history. Students used audiotape to record interviews with local veterans and their families, who talked about their experiences during the war, both at home and abroad. Then the class produced a book chronicling those experiences. That book, *A Tribute to Victory: Dubuque in World War II*, was professionally printed by Kendall/Hunt Publishers, a local business. The company agreed to donate a portion of the book’s sales to a fund the students established for the National

World War II Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. The students eventually raised more than \$5,000, making them one of the top 10 contributing schools nationwide. The book also went on to win The Loren Horton Community History Award from the State Historical Society of Iowa, and The Award of Merit from The National Association for State and Local History.

In addition to publishing transcripts of the oral

a book, students also wrote articles based on the interviews for the Dubuque *Telegraph Herald*. This authentic writing experience required students to think critically about their interviews and determine what was historically significant about them. It also meant that they gained important experience in organizing their information and in editing and revising their own writing.

Adelmann, who designs these projects along with English teacher Tim Ebeling (art teacher Shirley Deppe also helps students create historical displays, signs, and posters for the public seminars), sums up his approach this way: “If students feel as if they are going to make a difference and that they are going to make an impression on people, then you empower them to make decisions and become directors of their own learning.”

### Oral History in the Classroom

The centerpiece of the WWII project—the interviews with local residents—is a particularly compelling example of the use of oral history in the classroom. Dr. Barry A. Lanman, director of The Martha Ross Center for Oral History at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and the current president of the Association of Oral History Educators (AOHE), notes that research has shown that well-planned oral history projects can meet four major cognitive and affective goals: course content acquisition, skill development, student motivation, and student appreciation. Like all teaching approaches, it requires significant teacher preparation and skill to use it well.

For one thing, Lanman explains, it is important to note that there are two major approaches to using oral history. Passive oral history is passive in that the documents already exist, and students engage with oral history resources, such as videotapes or written transcripts, as part of the curriculum. At the very least, these resources represent an opportunity to learn from the actual history-makers themselves instead of from textbooks. To a large degree, the Internet has fueled the growth of passive oral history sources available for K–12 classrooms. Lanman notes that teachers now have access to an amazing number of previously hard-to-find primary-source documents in the form of passive oral-history interviews.

In an active oral-history project, students research topics, conduct their own interviews, and analyze their results. The widespread availability of video and audio recording technologies makes active oral history easier to integrate into K–12 classrooms. While video cameras and tape recorders make collecting oral histories simple, digital video cameras make it possible to include video on Web sites.

Interviews from video documentaries can effectively model how oral history is collected. “Teachers can use video, audio, and written transcripts of firsthand accounts to introduce, initiate,

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## Collecting History (continued)



Tuskegee Airman Robert Martin, Brig. General Paul Tibbets, and Women's Army Service Pilot (WASP) Elizabeth Strohfus (front row, 1-r) with Central Alternative High School students.

explain, and give examples of oral history," Lanman notes, "and to show students how the process works."

Adelmann used several programs from The History Channel, including excerpts from *America's Black Warriors: Two Wars to Win*, *Navajo Code Talkers*, and *One Hour Over Tokyo: The Doolittle Raid*, in this way. "Somebody has to write the narrative," he points out. "And somebody has to decide what part of an interview gets used and where it is going to be put in. Video becomes a model for me to show the kids how to do an interview and also how to extract information from an interview."

Once students complete the oral-history process, they can create oral-history products, which hone skills needed to publish articles, produce media projects, or develop displays or Web sites. These products extend the audience for the histories into schools and local communities, or even internationally if a Web site is produced. Lanman suggests that teachers who want to get started with active oral history in the classroom design simple, but effective, projects. For a unit on the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, for example, teachers could ask their students to interview a parent or grandparent about their experiences or memories of that time. Then, back in class, the teacher can facilitate an analytical discussion session to compare and contrast the different views, stories, and roles that emerge from these interviews.


### Meeting Standards

Lanman does not see the push for standards and accountability as a barrier to innovative oral-history projects. "You have to tailor your goals with an oral-history project to those specific ends, no question," he says, "As long as you develop the project around them, it does nothing but complement the content or skills reinforcement you want to teach." He notes that typical state and district standards include language related to skills that are prominent in oral-history projects, such as interpretation, understanding multiple points of view, understanding objectivity versus subjectivity, the concepts of reliability and validity, and corroboration. Lanman also points out that oral-history projects need not be confined to history class. Lately, he has seen successful projects in science, for example, where students are interviewing people in science careers.

Not surprisingly, a hallmark of Adelmann's projects at Central Alternative is strict adherence to district standards. "We have a manual of every K-12 standard and benchmark in the district," he says, "and if I'm going to write a new course, I have to show how my course is going to tie in directly to district standards."

### A Personal Connection

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of an active oral-history project is the way it builds a personal connection to a topic, whether it is meeting a real-life Tuskegee pilot or finding out about a neighbor's experiences on the home front during WWII. "It becomes personal, and that's when the history becomes real," claims Adelmann. "It's one thing to read something in the paper, or to read a book, but when Lee Archer [one of the Tuskegee pilots] is shaking your hand, that's incredibly powerful."

Oral history's local angle, notes Lanman, "is a real strength, because you can take the national trend, or what we read in the textbook, and ask, 'how does our community relate? Was our community typical, or was it atypical?'" Through their oral-history project, Adelmann's students also saw how history touched the citizens of their community during World War II. They learned how Bob Zehentner's plane took out a Japanese supply depot in Burma. Don Palmer told them about his POW experience outside Budapest. Becky Jones, who was 12 years old when America entered the war, brought the home front to life. Each story connected students to the larger historical events of the war and its impact on our lives today. 

## teaching tools

### The Association of Oral History Educators (AOHE)

<http://www.geocities.com/AOHElanman>

The AOHE is a national nonprofit professional organization dedicated to the effective implementation of oral history as an educational methodology. AOHE provides national teleconferences, regional assistance, newsletters, articles, and Internet resources to help teachers improve and expand their use of oral history as a teaching strategy.

### The Martha Ross Center for Oral History at the University of Maryland Baltimore County

<http://userpages.umbc.edu/~tatarewi/mrc>

Information on the mission and collections of the center, along with an oral-history bibliography. Teachers interested in starting an oral-history project are encouraged to contact the center for support and advice.

### Oral History Association

<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha>

Offers evaluation guidelines for oral-history interviews; publications, including "Oral History Projects in Your Classroom" by Linda P. Wood, with an introduction by Marjorie L. McLellan; and links to regional oral-history associations and centers around the country.