

Dr. Jim Leiker: Hi, I'm Dr. Jim Leiker, professor of history at Johnson County Community College. Welcome to the Kansas Oral History Project. Our purpose is to collect, preserve, and make available for general use stories about life in Kansas, especially those that pertain to public policy.

If I asked you to define history, you'd probably answer it's the study of the past, right? That's how most people would respond. In fact, history is really about studying the present. [pause] The past after all is a mighty long time period, and we cannot possibly know or record everything that has ever happened. We have to be selective, which is why professional historians constantly debate which events are influencing us now, and therefore are significant enough to be remembered.

We all do this for different reasons and different ways. Imagine waking up tomorrow morning with no memory of what happened before you went to bed. With no knowledge of your personal past, you'd have no idea of who you are. We need history for identity.

Genealogists say families need to know where their parents and grandparents lived, worked, fell in love, got married, what crises they endured, or how they might be related to another family on the other side of the planet, probably practicing a different religion or speaking a different language.

For most of us living in modern times, we study history through a national lens. So we understand how and why countries like the United States react the way they do when challenges emerge. It's why educators emphasize the necessity of courses in government and social science so that ignorance of the political process does not add to the challenges that lie ahead.

Whatever the reason, history is necessary for understanding the present. And as the present changes, the question we ask of history change as well. Answering those questions requires thinking about sources. After all, historians are not fiction writers. We don't get to make stuff up. How do we know what happened in the past? Most people would say, "Because it was written down." The world's major religions base their beliefs in recorded scriptures like the Bible or the Torah. Here in the USA, our system of government and our very rights are determined by the US Constitution, a written document.

Here's the problem with written sources. They leave gaps. They tell us what was recorded on a given day but not why, nor if the person doing the recording did so with bias or reluctance. Nor does it tell us how people of the time reacted to the message when they heard about it.

Bear in mind that for most of the past, people didn't read or write. Yet they had history nonetheless. They shared it through family stories, through verbal traditions that transmitted cultural values through generations.

[sounds of papers rustling, slight pause]

It wasn't only indigenous societies who did this. The origins of western-based history itself lie in ancient Greece with the first known historians like Herodotus and Thucydides, getting their start

by interviewing living witnesses to key events. Oral history helps us reconstruct people's daily lives. It helps fill in the gaps by drawing attention to memories, reactions, emotions, and lived experiences. Mostly it helps us get past textbook generalizations to reach a deeper, richer understanding of how history really punches us in the gut. And sometimes what we learn from oral interviews even helps us identify mistakes in the written record and correct them.

That brings me finally to why Kansas history? We've all heard the jokes, right? Jokes about flyover country, Dorothy and Toto, or about the motorist on I-70 who once spent a week making the six-hour drive across Kansas.

If you believe what coastal Americans say, which unfortunately I think too many Kansans do, we live in the middle of nowhere. But here's a news flash. We don't. Our state is literally in the middle of everywhere. Here is where Eastern concepts of Manifest Destiny collided with Western Indians defending their homes. It's where North and South clashed over slavery, starting a war and a battle for civil rights that continues into the present. It's where the Corn Belt meets the High Plains, where flooding in Eastern Kansas co-exists with drought in the West, and where the descendants of 19th century European immigrants rubbed elbows with recent arrivals from Southeast Asia and Central America. Whatever complicated issue the United States has tackled, be it Prohibition, abortion, suffrage, or segregation, you can bet Kansans were tackling it first.

The editor William Allen White said something to the effect of "As goes Kansas, so goes the nation," and I believe him. Kansans met those challenges through civic education, understanding the processes of government and policy making that require tough choices and pragmatic compromise. The careers of the people in these interviews embody those experiences. I hope you find their stories useful, and that they inspire you to produce stories and history of your own.

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