



## Welcome to the Wonderful World of Black Sheep Ancestors

Historically, regardless of the country of residence, the size of your average family was much larger than in modern times. Genealogists often encounter at least one black sheep ancestor in every family unit researched. For many researchers, the discovery of a "black sheep" turns out to be the fascinating part of tracing their family tree. Criminals, bigamists, and debtors all leave a paper trail if they were ever apprehended and convicted.

Professional genealogist, Roy Stockdill, author of the Online Newbies' Guide to Genealogy and Family History once made the following statements concerning black sheep ancestors.

1. "But I always say if you're going to be upset by finding out that your great-great-grandfather was a bigamist or a drunkard or gambled all the family money away then don't even think about tracing your family history.
2. It is a bit like being a detective: if you turn over enough stones, you are going to uncover something nasty underneath them eventually. There isn't a family in the land that hasn't got a skeleton in the cupboard."

Here are some background thoughts to remember.

1. The historical term is black sheep, but some use the term unwanted or missing ancestors. The terms are interchangeable.
2. Every family has multiple skeletons or black sheep in their closet.
3. This is true in every culture worldwide.
4. This is true to all ethnic groups. Most reasons across all ethnic and cultural boundaries but there are some that are unique to certain groups.
5. Families were much large historically and personality conflicts were common.
6. This factor increases the chances of running into the issue.

Ancestors who would fit the definition of being labeled a black sheep of any given family are usually ignored in written or verbal accounts passed down by family members. When or if they mentioned, it is often in brief terse comments that may or may not describe what the "offense" was. In some cases, this was caused by an incident against another family member or someone within the community, which embarrassed the

family. In other cases, they may have deserted the family for personal reasons. Most are banished or disinherited from the family. The missing ancestor is often uncovered, usually by accident, by another person doing genealogical research years or decades later. This set of circumstances often results in what I would call a deliberate misinformation campaign where rationale is often fabricated. Some type of event or incident may have occurred, but the circumstances have been exaggerated well out of proportion.

If you encounter any of the research scenarios listed below, the person in question may qualify as a black sheep ancestor:

1. Family stories about an unpopular ancestor. You must be cautious because stories are not always true although most contain some level of truth. One must also remember that there are always two sides to every story.
2. Your research uncovers an unexplained disappearance from the family. It could indicate an unrecorded death or migration for work, or the ancestor deserted the family. Another potential red flag scenario might involve a child that was listed as being a family member on a census or church record, along with a teenage daughter. Both suddenly disappear from the family without a trace. Beware of the possibility of a bogus death claim. I've encountered more than a few patrons that encountered this situation. They eventually discover the individual died but the time frame, locations, circumstances, etc. prove that the family account was completely false.
3. Your ancestor is listed in prison on a census. The name of the institution is always listed at the top of the form. The entry listed the person as an "inmate" or a "prisoner." Please note that not all inmates were in prisons. Some may have been sentenced to other institutions such as sanitariums, orphanages, asylums, etc. If you know or suspect your ancestor was imprisoned, you can find some records or indexes online. For federal institutions, check the National Archives link <https://www.archives.gov/research/prisons>. For state prisons, check the state archives' website.
4. If you hear accounts about a possible or suspected divorce, check newspaper articles about a divorce filing, desertion (wives would sometimes post newspaper ads for missing husbands), arrest, or a court action.
5. Court records are another source to check for divorces or criminal prosecutions.

The usual strategy used by many families is to initially pretend that the person does not exist. If that does not work and the ancestor is uncovered, the next strategy involves the vilification of the ancestor as often as possible when confronted. In some cases, they would say their actions were justified based on the social norms or mores in existence at the time within a particular society or culture.

Beware of the possibility that the real reason for the banishment, disinheritance, etc. may be related to the family or an influential member of the household being guilty of wrongdoing, and it led to a cover up. The ancestor who refused to go along with the lie

ended up having the blame transferred to them. If they are conveniently deceased, the person is not around to defend themselves.

The most common scenarios that I have encountered assisting genealogists for the past 30 years include but are by no means limited to the following:

1. Criminal lifestyle and/or conviction. Note what constituted criminal behavior in previous time periods may not be applicable to modern times.
2. Refusal to follow a family mandated directive or custom (such as an arranged marriage). This is especially true with various ethnic groups and among what some would call the blueblood families.
3. Unplanned and/or unwanted pregnancy, or miscarriage
4. In some cases, one or more members of a family over time become highly successful and wealthy. In some cases, they deliberately turn their backs on their families because of some perceived slight. In many cases, the opposite is true. They try to help the family, but the family is jealous of the success, rejects their overtures, and portrays the successful person as evil, corrupt, etc.
5. Extramarital affairs – How divisive this is in a family may depend on many factors. While historically it has been overlooked when it comes to males, females have been held to a different standard.
6. Homosexuality: There is nothing new about this alternative lifestyle choice. However, historically it was handled in a much different manner than is the case today. On the other hand, even in modern times, this issue can result in banishment and disinheritance from a family.
7. Dishonorable military service or patriotism: Military service that involved individual who fought for the British in the American Revolution, The Civil War, or the Vietnam War are prime examples of events that destroyed many family relationships, especially if the service member fought on what was perceived as the wrong side. In the case of both the Civil War and the Vietnam War, the family centered resentment and hatred has proven to exist even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
8. Mental or medical disability/conditions that embarrassed the family: In some families, especially those that tend to be prominent, anyone who is perceived as less than perfect may be a candidate for banishment. In extreme but documented cases, this issue even applied to physical features that some families took out on children and adult involved in extramarital affairs and was a punishment from God for the or suspected extramarital affair.
9. If someone chose to marry a person outside the approved ethnic, religious group, or race. Circumstances of this nature may also include someone who chose not to get married.
10. Employed in what was perceived as an unacceptable occupation.
11. Failure to achieve a family designated educational, social, religious or occupational goal.

## Supplemental Study Guides

The following supplemental study guides are available free upon request by emailing Bryan L. Mulcahy at [bmulcahy@leegov.com](mailto:bmulcahy@leegov.com).

1. Oral History and Genealogical Research
2. Oral History – Interview Techniques and Open Ended Questions
3. Oral History – Interview Script Questions

The following websites and You Tube tutorials listed below provide additional insight into records and strategies.

Ancestry.com – You Tube Video – Black Sheep in Your Family Tree – Crista Cowan - 32 Minutes

Ancestry.com – You Tube Video – Convicts and Criminals in Your Family Tree – Crista Cowan – 28 Minutes

Ancestry Support – Black Sheep Ancestors – 10 Things You Should Know  
<https://www.ancestrycdn.com/support/us/2016/11/blacksheep.pdf>

Black Sheep Ancestors - Note: Black Sheep Ancestors was selected as one of the 101 best genealogy websites in 2020! By Family Tree Magazine.  
<https://www.blacksheepancestors.com/>

Cyndi's List – Prisons, Prisoners, and Outlaw – General Sources  
<https://www.cyndislist.com/prisons/general/>

Facebook – Ancestry.com – You Tube – Exploring Black Sheep in Your Family – Crista Cowan – 32 Minutes

Facebook – Black Sheep Homepage  
<https://www.facebook.com/BlackSheepAncestry/>

Family Search Blog – Black Sheep Ancestors  
<https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/black-sheep-ancestors/>

Family Tree Magazine – Black Sheep Genealogy Society  
<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/resources/online/they-did-a-baaaad-baaaad-thing/>

Genealogy Bank – Blog – How to Find the Black Sheep of Your Family in Old Newspapers  
<https://blog.genealogybank.com/how-to-find-the-black-sheep-of-your-family-in-old-newspapers.html>

Kindred Past – Black Sheep Ancestors

<https://kindredpast.com/2017/03/23/using-family-stories-in-our-research/>

Lisson, Lisa – You Tube Video – Finding Your Ancestor’s Prison Record on Ancestry.com - Tips to Find Your Black Sheep Ancestors

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyWjBS7k0xA>

RootsWeb – Black Sheep

<http://sites.rootsweb.com/~mnwabbio/wab17.htm>

**NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers Regional Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.**

Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference – Genealogy Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library 5/12/2023



## Home and Family Sources

Genealogical research is much like charity. It should begin at home. Family documents, photos and other sources can provide you with many valuable clues to help you start on your genealogy adventure. They may include the names of ancestors, dates and places for births, marriages and deaths and insight into what life was like for your ancestors.

The first step in the process of discovering and locating home sources involves recording everything you know about your family. The following points are of particular importance:

1. Inquire about the existence of official documents or memorabilia that may have been saved or put in storage
2. Talk to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even neighbors.
3. When you interview older family members, consider recording their answers and memories on tape or video to preserve the information for future generations.
4. These interviews, also known as *oral histories*, may help you in future research. When a discrepancy arises, the tape may help you clarify what was actually said.
5. Family documents, photos and other sources can provide many valuable clues to get you started on your genealogy adventure.
6. They may include the names of ancestors, dates and places of births, marriages and deaths and insight into what life was like for your ancestors.
7. In almost every family, one or two members, perhaps more, become the "unofficial" family record keepers. Perhaps we should call them the "family archivist." For some reason, key family documents often end up in their hands.

One barrier to the efficient use of home sources is the inevitable difficult family member. While there are some families where one member hoards the family records and refuses to share information, this is relatively uncommon. In such situations, be as kind and persuasive as possible in asking the individual for permission to examine such records. The key element is to maintain your composure.

When dealing with a difficult family member, avoid any mention of taking the records with you and returning them at a later date. Your chances of success in this type of

situation are slim and none. You should also remember that there are other options that may present themselves later that may enable you to get around this individual.

In families where this is a problem, the record holder is usually worried about preserving the records, and concerned that if he or she loans them to a family member, they may get accidentally lost or destroyed. The best strategy is to gradually gain their confidence by first requesting permission to examine the records in their presence. Make careful notes. At a later date, as you get closer to your family member, he or she will come to trust you more, and may volunteer to let you take the records to make photocopies.

When it comes to historical documents and/or family heirlooms, overcoming barriers within a family, even in the best of circumstances, is usually a gradual process. This is particularly true if they are in the possession of an elderly family member.

Some of the most popular and informative types of home sources are listed below. A more detailed chart will follow at the end of this study guide. The bibliography at the end of this study guide provides sources for additional research.

### **Family Bible Records**

In previous generations, the family Bible was the one place where the most important family life events were recorded. The amount of information varies, as does the accuracy, but in most cases family Bibles are reliable starting points for research. In many cases, information concerning multiple generations was recorded. The Bible was handed down from generation to generation, usually to the eldest son or daughter. Some Bibles contain separate pages where birth and death dates were recorded. Others follow no particular pattern and must be examined completely.

If you find a family Bible, check the date of publication. For instance, if the date of publication of the Bible is 1829 and the first entry is for the year 1762, you know the entry was not made at the time of the actual event. This may affect the accuracy of the entry. Family Bibles may be the only source for genealogical information pertaining to births, marriages, and deaths in localities where public records have been destroyed by fires or wars. This may also be true in areas where these events took place before the advent of civil record keeping.

### **Old Letters**

If your family members were letter savers, these can be excellent sources for identifying family relationships and events that affected family members. Letter writers often included news of births, deaths, marriages, and personal observations. When examining old letters keep these points in mind:

1. Name and relationship of the writer.
2. Place from which the letter was written.
3. Address on the letter which would probably be the address from which it was written and the home of the writer.
4. Date the letter was written.
5. Genealogical value of the letter.

### **Journals and Diaries**

The genealogical value of these sources depends on the methods and thoroughness used by the original compiler. These sources may detail some or all of the following events:

1. Movements from place to place.
2. Dates of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces.
3. Personal observations (may be useful in reconstructing the time period and why they made certain life decisions).

### **Photographs**

Old photographs may be very useful for the genealogist, especially if they were labeled with the names and details of the people appearing in the photograph and the date the picture was taken. Photographs of men in uniform may indicate the branch of service and regiment in which they served.

### **Baptism or Christening Certificates**

These documents usually give the date of baptism or christening and the date of birth for the individual. Obtaining a certificate from a church can be much faster and cheaper than obtaining a certificate from public records. These certificates can be obtained from most churches regardless of whether they practice infant or adult baptism. The possible exception to this rule is contacting small churches or those in remote locations. They may or may not issue formal certificates. In some cases, the best you can get is a photocopy from the ministers' logbook.

### **Scrapbooks**

Scrapbooks are often among the first items many researchers look for when searching a residence for genealogical information. Old scrapbooks kept by families may include some or all of the following items:

1. Newspaper clippings
2. Photographs of family members
3. Pictures of houses the family has lived in
4. Death notices, obituaries, funeral/memorial cards
5. Miscellaneous items that may provide clues to places of residence, occurrence of important events, and other information of interest to the researcher.

Obituaries are especially important because they usually list the surviving family members.

### **Certificates of Birth, Marriage, and Death**

These documents are usually prepared at or near the time of the recorded date. One can be reasonably confident of their authenticity and accuracy. The amount of information included can vary depending on the jurisdiction. Finding any of these certificates in your home will eliminate the necessity of obtaining them from public sources later, if they exist at all. This will save the researcher time and money.



### **Family Histories**

Many families have a person who has acquired the label “Family Historian”. Frequently in large families, it turns out to be the youngest daughter or son. If you are lucky, this person may have taken the initiative and compiled a family history either in book or manuscript format. This person frequently has custody of the family Bible, which has been handed down through the generations. This person may also have files containing information on family members.

### **Memorial Funeral Cards**

Prior to World War II, many families announced the death of an individual by sending a printed or beautifully handcrafted memorial card to family members, friends, or business associates. This is still true, but more in foreign countries than in America. Information given usually includes the name of the deceased, date of death, and place of burial. Some may also include highlights of the person’s life and a favorite saying or small poetic verse. These cards were more common among Catholic and the more traditional Protestant denominations such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians.

### **Miscellaneous Legal Papers**

Examples of items in this category include copies of wills, deeds, land grants, citizenship papers, naturalization papers, and passports. These items can be used to establish places of residence, dates of birth, ownership of land, and ownership of items of value, which could lead the researcher to other valuable records. When beginning your search for home sources, be sure to check the following places:

1. Your home
2. Parents’ home
3. Homes of close relatives
4. Friends and neighbors who were close to your parents and family

## **CHECKLIST OF POTENTIAL RECORD SOURCES IN THE HOME**

From the standpoint of genealogical research, the following checklist contains the most common and useful record types that tend to be found in the homes of family members or relatives. If your personal circumstances caused you to lose touch with your family, it is possible that a close neighbor or friend of the family may have some of these items in their possession.

### **PERSONAL RECORDS**

Journal  
Diary  
Biography  
Letters  
Photographs  
Autograph Album  
Personal Knowledge  
Baby Book  
Wedding Book  
Scrapbooks  
Funeral Book  
Guest register  
Travel Account/Log  
Bookplates

### **CERTIFICATES**

Birth  
Marriage  
Death  
Divorce  
Adoption  
Graduation  
Christening  
Blessing  
Baptism  
Confirmation  
Ordination  
Ministerial  
Membership  
Apprenticeship  
Mission Release  
Achievement  
Award

### **FAMILY RECORDS**

Bible  
Pedigrees  
Family Group Sheets  
Genealogies  
Books of Remembrance  
Family Bulletins  
Family Histories  
Printed Histories  
Manuscript Histories  
Local Histories  
Family Traditions  
Birthday Books

**MILITARY RECORDS**

Service  
 Pension  
 Disability  
 Discharge  
 National Guard  
 Selective Service  
 Bounty Award  
 Service Medals  
 Ribbons  
 Sword  
 Firearms  
 Uniform  
 Citations  
 Separation papers  
 War Rosters/Memorials

**LEGAL PAPERS**

Wills  
 Deeds  
 Land Grants  
 Water Rights  
 Mortgages  
 Leases  
 Bonds  
 Loans  
 Contracts  
 Summons  
 Subpoena  
 Tax Notices  
 Guardian Papers  
 Abstracts of Title  
 Adoption Papers

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Wedding  
 Birth  
 Death  
 Funeral  
 Graduation  
 Divorce  
 Anniversary  
 Memorial Cards  
 New Job  
 Travel  
 New Home  
 Birthday  
 Professional  
 Engagement

**MEMBERSHIP RECORDS**

Cards  
 Publications  
 Programs  
 Uniforms  
 Awards

**HEALTH RECORDS**

X-rays  
 Insurance Reports  
 Hospital Records  
 Medical Records  
 Immunizations

**SCHOOL RECORDS**

Diplomas  
 Report Cards  
 Honor Roll  
 Awards  
 Transcripts  
 Yearbooks  
 Publications  
 Alumni Lists  
 Fraternities/Sororities

**CITIZENSHIP PAPERS**

Naturalization  
 Denization  
 Alien Registration  
 Deportment  
 Passport  
 Visa  
 Vaccination

**NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS**

Announcements  
 Obituaries  
 Special Events  
 Vital Statistics  
 Home Town Newspapers  
 Professional  
 trade  
 Human Interest

**LICENSES**

Business  
 Occupation  
 Professional  
 Hunting  
 Firearms  
 Drivers  
 Motor Vehicle Registration

**FINANCIAL RECORDS**

Accounts  
Bills  
Receipts  
Check Stubs  
Estate records

**HOUSEHOLD ITEMS**

Silverware  
Needlework  
Sampler  
Tapestries  
Dishes  
Friendship Quilt  
Coat of Arms  
Insignias  
Souvenirs  
Clothing  
Tools  
Plaques  
Engraved Jewelry

**BOOKS**

Atlases  
Yearbooks  
Textbooks  
Prizes  
Treasured Volumes  
Vocational  
Foreign Language  
Inscriptions  
Bibles

**EMPLOYMENT  
RECORDS**

Apprenticeship Income Tax  
Awards  
Graduation  
Citations  
Severance papers  
Social Security  
Retirement papers  
Pension  
Union

### Short List of Selected Internet Sources

Ancestors.com – Family and Home Information Sources Checklist

<http://www.ancestors.com/charts/oldpdf/checklist1.pdf>

Family Search Wiki – Checklist of Compiled Sources and Where to Find Them

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/A\\_Checklist\\_of\\_Compiled\\_Sources\\_and\\_Where\\_to\\_Find\\_Them](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/A_Checklist_of_Compiled_Sources_and_Where_to_Find_Them)

Family Search Wiki – How to Find Genealogical Records

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States,\\_How\\_to\\_Find\\_Genealogy\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States,_How_to_Find_Genealogy_Records)

Genealogy.com: First Steps – Genealogy Begins at Home

[https://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/79\\_fs-start.html](https://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/79_fs-start.html)

Genealogy Bank: Genealogy 101 #7 Home Sources

<https://blog.genealogybank.com/genealogy-101-7-home-sources.html>

Home Sources for Genealogical Information

<http://www.bobcatsworld.com/genclass/Home%20Check%20list.pdf>

Your DNA Guide – Using Home Sources to Build Your Family Tree

<https://www.yourdnaguide.com/ydgblog/home-sources-family-tree>

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Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy, Coordinator-Paula Stuart Warren. Contributors-D. Joshua Taylor, Elissa Scalise Powell, William M. Litchman, and Birdie Monk Holsclaw, c2007. **Genealogy Reference 929.1 SALT**

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Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy. Coordinator-Paula Stuart Warren. Contributors-Chuck Knuthson, Marianne Crump, Thomas McGill, Anne Wuehler, Anne Roach, Ruth Maness, John Phillip Colletta, Kory Meyerink, Judith W. Hansen, and Birdie Monk Holsclaw, c2008. **Genealogy Reference 929.1 SALT**

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Compiled by Bryan Mulcahy, Reference – Genealogy Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library, 2/18/2023.

**Oral History Interview Techniques**  
**Open Ended Questions**  
**Definition and Examples**

**Definition:** An open ended question is specifically designed to encourage personal commentary versus a simple "yes" or "no" answers. Open ended questions should be designed to try and elicit facts, as well as feelings and descriptions. While you should always try to elicit such details as names and dates, remember that facts also include finding out *how, why, where* and *with what results*.

This study guide is designed to provide examples of questions that professional genealogists have recommended incorporating into oral history interviews. For more detailed information, please see our companion study guide **Oral History and Genealogical Research**. This study guide discusses techniques, research strategies, and contains a bibliography of additional sources for more in-depth studies.

1. What is your full name?
2. Why did your parents select this name for you?
3. Did you have a nickname?
4. What is the story behind the nickname?
5. Did you ever use this nickname as your regular every day name?
6. If so, why
7. When and where were you born?
8. How did your family come to live there?
9. Were there other family members in the area? Who and where did they reside?
10. What was the house (apartment, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones?
11. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
12. What is your earliest childhood memory?
13. Describe the personalities of your family members.
14. What kind of games did you play growing up?
15. What was your favorite toy and why?
16. What was your favorite thing to do for fun (movies, beach, etc.)?
17. Did you have family chores? What were they? Which was your least favorite?
18. Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?
19. What was school like for you as a child? What were your best and worst subjects? Where did you attend grade school? High school? College?
20. What school activities and sports did you participate in?
21. Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
22. Who were your childhood heroes?
23. What were your favorite songs and music?
24. Did you have any pets? If so, what kind and what were their names?
25. What was your religion growing up? What church, if any, did you attend? Did you later change your religious affiliation? Why?
26. Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?
27. Who were your friends when you were growing up?



28. What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up? Did any of them personally affect your family?
29. Describe a typical family dinner. Did you all eat together as a family? Who did the cooking? What were your favorite foods?
30. How were holidays (birthdays, Christmas, etc.) celebrated in your family? Did your family have special traditions?
31. How is the world today different from what it was like when you were a child?
32. Who was the oldest relative you remember as a child? What do you remember about them?
33. What do you know about your family surname?
34. Is there a naming tradition in your family, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?
35. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors?
36. Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?
37. Have any recipes been passed down to you from family members?
38. Are there any physical characteristics that run in your family?
39. Are there any special heirlooms, photos, bibles or other memorabilia that have been passed down in your family?
40. What was the full name of your spouse? Siblings? Parents?
41. When and how did you meet your spouse? What did you do on dates?
42. What was it like when you proposed (or were proposed to)? Where and when did it happen? How did you feel?
43. Where and when did you get married? What memory stands out the most from your wedding day?
44. How would you describe your spouse? What do (did) you admire most about them?
45. What do you believe is the key to a successful marriage?
46. How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?
47. Why did you choose your children's names?
48. What was your proudest moment as a parent?
49. What did your family enjoy doing together?
50. What was your profession and how did you choose it?
51. If you could have had any other profession what would it have been? Why wasn't it your first choice?
52. Of all the things you learned from your parents, which do you feel was the most valuable?
53. What accomplishments were you the most proud of?
54. What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?
55. Is there any decision or circumstance that you would change about your life if you could do it over again?

## Script for Oral History Interviews

I often encounter many genealogists who say they have older family members, friends, or other types of acquaintances that are still alive and would know specific facts about past generations and ancestors. However, they have no idea how to approach them, let alone come up with questions to ask. Your first step would be to prepare a strategy using the information contained in previous sections of this study guide.

This section of your study guide contains what I term a script or guide to formulating questions. The key to success is asking questions that will force the person to provide more than a simple yes or no answer. The questions listed below are broken down by time periods. Feel free to adapt this outline of prospective questions to your own needs.

### Pre-1930 Period

#### Interview With \_\_\_\_\_

Your age in 1930 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult

Size of your family in the 1920s. Name of persons in the household & relationship to you.

Residence(s) before 1930, with dates, street, town, state:

When did the family get any of these “modern conveniences”? Telephone, Car, Electricity, Indoor plumbing, running water in the house, vacuum cleaner, electric fans, washing machine, other?

What kind of cooking stove did you or your mother use before 1930? What kind of refrigeration of food?

How was your house heated in the winter?

Did your family own its home? Rent? How much was rent?

What can you tell me about your house(s) before 1930? Rooms? Size? One, two or more stories? Wood, brick, etc.?

Did your family ever experience a house fire? Flood? Other natural disaster? Elaborate.

Were you a student before 1930? How far in school did you go?

How far from your home was school?

Did you have to buy your books or did the school provide them?

What can you tell me about your elementary or high school experiences?

What jobs did family members hold in the 1920s or before? (Did any of the women work outside the home?)

Did you work in the 1920s? Doing what?

How did you decide “what you wanted to be when you grew up”?

What did you do for entertainment in the 1920s or before?

When did you or your family get a radio for the first time? A phonograph?

Did anyone in the family play a musical instrument? Who? What?

How often did you go to the movies? Favorites?

Did the family have pets? Explain.

What part did sports or games play in your life in this period?

During your childhood, what is your earliest memory of home and family? How old were you?

What is your earliest memory of events outside the family? How old were you?

During childhood, what were your favorite toys and games? Did you make any of your toys?

To what extent were family gatherings parts of your life before 1930? Explain.

To what extent were religious activities a part of your life before 1930? Explain.  
 What, if any, rules governed Sunday or the Sabbath in your home before 1930?  
 Was dancing allowed in your family? Card playing? Dating without a chaperone?  
 Were family members restricted in what they could read for pleasure?  
 What other rules or customs governed behavior?  
 How did your family celebrate or observe birthdays? Christmas or other religious holidays?  
 July 4?  
 What wedding or funeral customs do you remember in your family or community in this period?  
 Do you remember when you or your family got a camera for the first time?  
 What kind of transportation did you use the most?  
 How did you get to school or work?  
 What did the family do at lunchtime? Come home or eat elsewhere? What do you remember  
 about school lunches?  
 What was the main meal at noon or in the evening? What did you call that meal?  
 If you lived on a farm, what crops did the family raise? What food?  
 Did any family members serve in the military in World War I? Who? Where?  
 How did the family celebrate the end of World War I?  
 Was this a good period in your life?  
 How did your experiences before 1930 affect your life thereafter?

### **Depression-1930s**

#### **Interview with \_\_\_\_\_**

Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your age in 1930 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult  
 Size of your family in the 1930s. Names of persons in the household & relationship to you.  
 Your residence(s) in the 30s, with dates, street, town, state:  
 Did the family own its home? Rent? How much was rent?  
 Did the family have a telephone? Electricity? Electric appliances? Indoor plumbing and running  
 water? What kind of cook stove was used? Which of these were acquired for the first time  
 during the 1930s?  
 Were you in school anytime in the 30s? What level?  
 How did the depression affect the students in the family?  
 How did you or they finance education? (jobs, scholarships, parents, etc.?)  
 Did elementary and high school students have to buy their own books or did the school provide  
 them?  
 Did you or your family members have to drop out of school to work? If so, temporarily or  
 permanently?  
 Who in the family held jobs during the 30s? Doing What? How many hours/day or days/ week  
 did you or they work?  
 Did you or family members have trouble finding a job?  
 How were you/they able to find work?  
 Were wages paid in cash, goods, or scrip?  
 Was the family self supporting? Did you help support your family? Explain.  
 Was the family a “do-it-yourself” group? If so, explain. Sewing? Carpentry? Making toys? Etc.  
 How did you or your family “make ends meet”?  
 Were you or your family able to buy on credit? What items?

Do you remember prices of any items?  
 What did you do for a recreation or entertainment?  
 Did you go to movies? How often?  
 When did you see your first movie with sound? Title?  
 First movie in color? Title? Favorite movies, stars?  
 Did your family own and listen to the radio? Favorite programs?  
 What part did sports and games play in your life in the 1930s?  
 If you were a child, what were your favorite toys and games?  
 Did the family have pets? Explain.  
 What chores were the children and teenagers expected to do?  
 To what extent were you involved in religious activities in the 1930s? School activities?  
 Which social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations were you involved in?  
 Did you or the family own a car? More than one? What make/model car?  
 Do you remember the price of the car and gasoline?  
 If you had no car, what kind of transportation did you rely on?  
 Did you or family members travel? By what means?  
 Were trips mostly for business or pleasure? (Comments are welcome.)  
 What is your earliest or most vivid memory of home and family? How old were you?  
 In the 1930s, did the family raise, hunt, make, can, preserve any kind of its own food? If so, what items?  
 Which food items were most difficult to obtain?  
 Which were easy to obtain?  
 Did the family have to sacrifice any luxuries or conveniences during the depression? Explain.  
 Did you listen to President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats on the radio? What did you think of him as President during the Depression?  
 Did you or family members work for any of the New Deal agencies (Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, etc.)? What kind of jobs? Where?  
 Did you hear Orson Welles's *The War of the Worlds* on the radio on 30 October 1939? What did you think? Did you or family members believe it was true? Why or why not?  
 How have your experiences during the depression affected your attitudes and life of the present?

### **World War II and the 1940s**

**Interview with** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your age in 1940 \_\_\_\_\_ or age group during the war: child teenager young adult adult  
 Size of your family in the 1940s. Names of persons in household & relationship to you.  
 Residence(s) during the war.  
 Residence(s) after the war (1945-1950) with dates, street, town, state.  
 In the 1940s, did you or your family own your home or rent?  
 Which "modern conveniences" did you or your family have before 1940: telephone, radio, electric toaster, mixer, or vacuum cleaner, washing machine, record player, attic or whole-house fan, etc?  
 Did you acquire any of these for the first time after the war and before 1950?  
 Did you or your family acquire television or air conditioning before 1950?  
 After the war, what were some of the first major purchases you or your family made?  
 Were you or your family part of the "rush to the suburbs" after 1945? When? Where?

Were you a student during the 1940s? What level? Did you or family members pursue higher education during the war? Who? Where?

How did the start of war change your life or plans?

Your job(s) during the war. What jobs did other family members have?

What kind of work schedule did you have? What were your wages?

Who in the family did wartime volunteer work and what kind? Please be specific.

What did you do for entertainment during the war years?

To what extent were you involved in social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations in the 1940s? Which ones?

If you were a child, what were your favorite toys and games?

Did you or your family own a car? More than one? What make/model?

What difficulties did you have in keeping it (repairs, parts, tires, gasoline)?

Were you able to travel for pleasure? By car, bus, train? Destination(s)?

What were you doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941? What was your reaction?

Did you hear Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" speech on December 8, 1941? What was your reaction?

Were you or family members in military service? Who? Which service? Rank(s)?

Were you or family member's volunteers or draftees? When did you or they enter service?

Where were you (they) stationed? Or where did you (they) fight? Please comment.

Did your family raise any of its own food during the war? If so, what items?

Did your family can or preserve any of its own food? If so, what items?

What food items were most difficult to obtain? What food items were easiest to get?

What problems did you have in using ration stamps?

What commodities (clothes, toilet tissue, appliances, tires, toys, gasoline, etc.) were most difficult to get?

What items were not available at all?

Did your area experience blackouts? Brownouts? Please comment.

Did you rely more on radio, newspapers, movie newsreels, or friends for news?

If you were a child, what is your earliest memory of home & family? How old were you?

To what extent were you aware of the war?

What was your reaction (or your parents') to Roosevelt's decision to seek a fourth term in 1944?

What was your reaction (or your parents') at the time to dropping the two atomic bombs in Japan?

How did you celebrate the end of the war, either VE or VJ Day? IF you were in the military, when did you get home?

After the war, did you or family members have difficulty finding work?

After the war, how was your life different from what it had been in 1940?

How have your World War II experiences affected your attitudes on life?

### **Decade of the 1950s**

**Interview with** \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_

Your age in 1950 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle appropriate: child teenager young adult adult

Size of your family in the 1950s. Name of persons in the family & relationship with you.

Residence(s) during the 1950s, with dates, street, town, state:

Did your family own its home? How much did the home cost?  
 Did your family rent its home? How much was rent?  
 In what ways was your home different in the 1950s from the 1930s and 1940s?  
 Did you live in a new house? An older house?  
 Which conveniences did you or your family get for the first time in the 1950s? When?  
 Washing machine, clothes, dryer, dishwasher, electric or gas cook stove, vacuum cleaner,  
 television, air conditioning  
 If you were in school in this decade, what level? Where?  
 What rules & regulations did your school (s) have?  
 What jobs did you or your family members have in the 1950s?  
 When did you get your first job? What were your wages/salary?  
 Did you have any job(s) as a teenager? Elaborate.  
 What did you do for recreation and leisure activity in the 1950s?  
 To what extent were sports part of your life in this period? As participant or spectator ?  
 What family rules or restrictions governed dating in the 1950s?  
 Was dancing allowed in your family or community? If so, what dances did you enjoy?  
 If you were a child in the 1950s, what were your favorite toys and games?  
 Did you have and ride a bicycle?  
 If you had a TV, what rules or restrictions, if any, governed its use?  
 What were your favorite TV programs?  
 Favorite movies?  
 Did you listen to the radio in the 1950s? Favorite programs?  
 Did you buy phonograph records of popular music? Or other music?  
 Did you have favorite music stars? If so, who?  
 Were you an Elvis Presley fan? Did you go to drive-in movies?  
 What fads or fashions did you enjoy in the 1950s?  
 What organizations ( social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal) were you involved in?  
 To what extent were religious activities part of your life in the 1950s? Explain.  
 When and why did you take your first airplane trip? (Even if before 1950)  
 If you were a child or teen, did you get an allowance? How much, how often?  
 What chores, if any, were attached to the allowance?  
 What chores were you or children and teens in your home expected to do in the 1950s?  
 Do you remember prices of anything, including cars, education, appliances and food?  
 Which if any, major news events did you watch on TV? ( Eisenhower's inaugurations, Queen  
 Elizabeth II coronation, the McCarthy hearings, etc.)  
 Were you or your family in the military during the Korean war (1950-1953)? Elaborate who,  
 when, where, etc.  
 What was your reaction to the outbreak of the Korean War so soon after WWII?  
 Looking back, what differences, if any, do you see between life in the 40s and the 50s?  
 What "firsts" occurred in your life in the 1950s?  
 What significant events in your life occurred in the 1950s?  
 How would you characterize the 1950s in your life? How did this decade compare to the ones  
 before or after?

### **Decade of the 1960s and Beyond**

Interview with \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_

Your age in 1960 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult

Size of your family in the 1960s. Names of persons in the family & relationship to you.

Residence(s) in the 1960s, with dates, town, state:

Did your family own its home? When was the home purchased, and at what price?

Did your family rent its home? How much was rent?

Describe your main residence of the decade. What were its outstanding characteristics, features, amenities?

If you were a student during the 1960s, what level, where?

What level of schooling did you complete?

What school rules governed dress and behavior for students in your family in the 1960s?

To what extent did your schooling prepare you for your career?

How did you decide what career you would pursue?

What job(s) did you or family members have in the 1960s? Do you remember the level of wages?

If you were a teenager during the 1960s, did you hold any job(s)? Elaborate.

What did you enjoy most for recreation and entertainment in the 1960s?

If you were a child in the 1960s, what were your favorite toys, games, and pastimes?

To what extent was television part of your life in the 1960s?

What family rules, if any, governed the use of television in your home?

To what extent were movies, popular music, and radio part of your life in the 1960s?

To what extent were sports part of your life, as participant or as spectator?

What *family* rules, if any, governed dating and teen activities in the 1960s? (use of car, curfew, dress code, etc.)

What fads and fashions did you enjoy in the 1960s?

Were there fads, fashions, or aspects of popular culture you avoided in the 1960s?

Were you or family members considered “hippies” or “flower children”? Explain.

As a child or teen did you get an allowance? How much, how often?

Were chores attached to allowance? What chores were you or children in your home expected to do in the 1960s?

To what extent were religious activities part of your life in the 1960s?

Which social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations did you participate in?

Did you watch on television or listen on radio to any of these news events? What was your reaction?

- a. First US manned space flight May, 1961
- b. Cuban missile crisis, October, 1962
- c. US military build up in Vietnam from 1963 forward
- d. President John F. Kennedy’s death and funeral, November 1963
- e. Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, April, 1968
- f. Apollo 11 landing on the moon, 20 July 1969
- g. Other?

Were you or any family members involved in anti-war, feminists, or civil rights demonstrations during the 1960s? Who? Where? Elaborate.

Were you or any family member in the military during the Vietnam war? Who? Where? When? Drafted or volunteered?

What “firsts” occurred in your life during the 1960s? (first car, first time to vote, first job, first child, etc.)

What significant events occurred in your own life in the 1960s?

How would you characterize the 1960s in the life of the country? In your personal life?

How did this decade compare to those before or after in your life?

Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers Regional Library 6/20/2022



## Oral History and Genealogical Research

One of the most overlooked genealogical research techniques is the personalized interview. The most common mistake many researchers make is jumping to the conclusion that once their parents are deceased; there is no reason to explore further interview options. Additional options to consider include the following:

1. Neighbors (even if they were not friendly)
2. Co-workers
3. Clergy
4. Teachers
5. Members of social clubs
6. Sorority/Fraternity brothers/sisters
7. Classmates
8. Business partners
9. Former spouses
10. Friends
11. Bartenders
12. Alumni offices (they might be able to recommend candidates)

With some prior planning and forethought, interviews with family members, neighbors, or any of the other options previously mentioned can progress beyond the basic who-begat-whoms, and delve more deeply into the rich fabric of family history, such as relationships, quality of life, motivations, migrations, and the impact of these events on the family.

Simply defined, oral history is a method of collecting historical information on audio and/or videotape. It includes planned-in-advance tape or video recorded interviews with someone who has firsthand knowledge of the event or subject being studied. Oral interviews frequently provide insights into how people felt about what happened.

Because of the intensely personal nature of the interview, the information from such a session tends to be more subjective and evaluative than details found in a written document. Oral history allows people to preserve their voices for future generations who will have the advantage of hearing a person tell their story in their own words.

There are many detailed books on this subject, but the following suggestions provide a quick “how-to” for planning an interview session. A more detailed discussion will follow at the end of this study guide under **13 Steps for Getting the Most Out of Family History Interviews**. For now, keep these key points in mind:

### **1. Choose your possible interviewees**

Determine what information you are seeking and then choose family members or neighbors who can best provide this information. One consideration would be the integrity of the person being considered for an interview. Don't overlook close friends of deceased relatives. Experience has shown that these people sometimes know more about a family's history than the family members themselves.

Don't overlook people even if they have a reputation for "stretching the truth". Even the most exaggerated account often has some truth included in the facts. Do not dismiss "black sheep". They sometimes are the ones telling the truth and that is the reason they have been ostracized from the family or group. Do not dismiss candidates with Alzheimer's. With some help, these people may still be capable of providing insight into events and people from the distant past, especially if they were children at the time of the event or when the distant ancestor was alive.

## 2. **Prioritize the interviewee list**

As a rule, place the oldest interviewees at the top of the list. Remember that once these folks have passed away, the valuable information locked in their thoughts and memories will be gone forever. Next, include those people whose life stories and recollections will help you solve current or perplexing genealogical problems. Last, add those who can provide information on branches of the family that you will be researching in the future.

## 3. **Contact the interviewee**

Explain to the interviewee what you are doing and the reason he/she is important in your research. Arrange for a pre-interview meeting where you can outline the topics you will cover. Use this meeting to build a sense of comfort and trust with the interviewee. You should also discuss the oral history process and come to an agreement as to how his or her material can be used in your research.

## 4. **Conduct some background research and compile an interview outline**

Supplement background data you've compiled by perusing old letters, newspaper clippings, family bibles, and other family memorabilia. Compile an outline of questions that you will ask the interviewee and be sure to follow what you've agreed upon in advance. Don't introduce "surprise" subjects or your interview might be terminated immediately.

## 5. **Practice with the equipment in advance**

Take the time to ensure that whatever recording equipment used is in proper working condition. If there is any doubt in your mind about operation procedures, consider asking a friend or family member familiar with technology to be present. Some companies that rent equipment for events of this nature offer technical assistance for a fee. When in doubt, if there are no family or neighbor options available, pay the fee. This is especially important if you are interviewing a very elderly person. They may become impatient or nervous with frequent interruptions. You may also lose your train of thought and forget to ask questions that may be critical to your research.

These recommendations can help you put yourself in the best possible situation for success. The amount of time spent in preparation can pay dividends in the final product. For outline purposes, here are the steps listed above in a more concise outline format:

1. Definition of **Oral History**: Collecting historical information pertaining to the history and life events of a given family from some or all of the following:
  - a. Parents

- b. Grandparents
  - c. Relatives
  - d. Spouses
  - e. Neighbors
  - f. School teachers
  - g. Co-workers
  - h. Ministers/priests
2. Why can **Oral History** have such impact on genealogical research?
    - a. Allows researchers to investigate the fabric of their ancestor's family history
    - b. Understand relationships
    - c. How they lived on a daily basis
    - d. Why they were motivated to work in the occupations they chose or make life decisions which impacted the family
    - e. Understand the reasons behind migration patterns
    - f. Uncover lost family members
  3. Information gleaned from an interview can lead the researcher to a variety of primary and secondary records and indexes containing genealogical information in the United States, Canada, Europe, and the British Isles depending on where the immigrant ancestor originated from before coming to North America:
    - a. Vital records
    - b. Probate proceedings
    - c. Census records (local, state, federal, school, and employer)
    - d. Land/property records
    - e. Tax records
    - f. Church records
    - g. School records
    - h. Emigration records and any relevant details
    - i. Immigration and naturalization records
  4. Oral histories can provide clues into family related matters such as:
    - a. Where to begin searching for specific records in Europe and the British Isles
    - b. Provide insight to family traditions and heirlooms
    - c. Provide insight as to incidents involving ancestors labeled as "black sheep" or possible cover-ups by family members, neighbors, or associates
    - d. Provide clues about medical related problems or conditions
    - e. Allows the older generation the opportunity to give their side of the story and explain their conduct in their own words

### **Oral History Interview**

**Definition:** The process of collecting historical information via written memoirs or personalized interview using audio or videotape from a person who has firsthand knowledge of the event or subject being studied.

### **Primary situations where Oral Histories are common practice:**

1. Family History (family members, friends, co-workers, teachers, neighbors)
2. Determine specifics about medical history/conditions (this is very popular with adoptees or military people seeking to prove WWII or Agent Orange)
3. Memoirs from historical events (WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, etc.)
4. History of a given institution, business, or organization (Boston Red Sox, New York Yankees, Brooklyn Dodgers, Catholic Charities, Corporation, Church, etc.)
5. Legal research (criminal investigations, parole decisions, court nominations, political nominations)
6. Employment checks
7. Note: The following are two myths pertaining to oral history:
  - a. Oral history pertains only to genealogy
  - b. If the parents have passed away, there is no need to spend time on doing oral histories.

### **Keys To Successful Interviews**

Preparation is the key factor for successful interviews. Successful interviews, especially when dealing with elderly interviewees depends on taking the time to plan every step of the process. This is especially true when dealing with someone in poor health. In scenarios of this nature, there are no guarantees that you may get more than one opportunity. Have your strategy in place prior to the interview.

1. Determine what type of information you would like to find
2. Read a history of the locality, or organization, etc., concentrating on the time period which would pertain to the interviewee
3. Create a time line of major events that would have directly affected the interviewee
4. Draft a list of potential people who have first hand knowledge of the family, event, or time period that will be the subject of the interview
5. Prioritize the list based on the following factors:
  - a. Those people with life stories or first hand knowledge that will answer your questions in the most accurate and thorough manner
  - b. Professionals always recommend to begin interviewing the oldest and/or those with the frailest health first. Remember, when a person dies, they take their knowledge with them.
  - c. Future possibilities of who may be used for specifics pertaining to the area of research
6. Contact the interviewee:
  - a. Explain what you are doing and the reason he or she is important to your research
  - b. Concentrate on putting the interviewee at ease and advertise a willingness to work together to create a schedule that accommodates their needs. Also discuss the possibility of an audio or video recording of the interview.
  - c. Outline the topics you would like to cover
  - d. Inquire about the existence of some or all of the following:
    - (1) Old letters, diaries
    - (2) Scrapbooks

- (3) Newspaper clippings (family)
  - (4) Photographs
  - (5) Family Bibles
  - (6) Misc. documents (awards, diplomas, certificates, legal papers)
  - e. Set up an interview schedule that the interviewee is comfortable with (*emphasize that you are flexible and the schedule can be adjusted to fit unforeseen circumstances*)
7. Select the equipment necessary to conduct the interview. Become completely comfortable with the features to ensure no problems during the actual interview. (\**Note: Some interviewers bring a backup digital or video recorder just in case!*). For more information on equipment that can be used for interviews, please visit the following links.

Family Search Wiki – Creating Oral Histories

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Creating\\_Oral\\_Histories](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Creating_Oral_Histories)

Oral History Society – Choosing the Right Equipment – Oral Histories

<https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-beginners/equipment/>

Penn State University – Oral History Resource

<https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/SC/OralHistory/equipment#:~:text=Generally%20speaking%2C%20we%20recommend%20a,or%20external%20high%20quality%20microphones.>

## The Interview

1. Establish a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
  - a. Have a prepared agenda
  - b. Let the interviewee know the tape or video recorder can be turned off if they need to rest or compose themselves. (\**Note: Some elderly people have short attention spans. Also, memories may cause them to become emotional.*)
2. Establish a feeling of rapport with the interviewee
  - a. Consider their feelings—let them say what they feel in their own words
  - b. Put aside any differences you’ve had in the past
  - c. Don’t argue or correct them even if you feel what they are saying is wrong or untrue
3. Give the interviewee a chance to “warm up” and answer questions fully
  - a. Most people are nervous at the start of an interview
  - b. As the interview progresses, they begin to feel more at ease
  - c. Start the session with easy questions
  - d. Save the tough or analytical questions for later in the session
  - e. Do not rush the interviewee in their answers – you may need to tolerate some long-winded answers as part of the process
4. Proceed along an outline going from general areas of questioning to specific events, back to general areas
  - a. Ask open-ended questions designed to discourage yes or no answers
  - b. Ask a broad question to open each area of discussion, and then zero in on specific areas of detail. Repeat this formula for each subject area covered.

- c. If it appears the person is encountering mental blocks, focus on life changing events which occurred during their lifetimes:
  - (1) First love affair
  - (2) First car
  - (3) First television
  - (4) Wedding day
  - (5) Normandy landings
  - (6) V-E day (World War II)
  - (7) Moon landings
  - (8) Date of parent's death
  - (9) Date of birth for first child
  - (10) First home purchased
  - (11) John F. Kennedy assassinated
5. Learn to listen: Good interviewing involves good listening. This is especially true if the interviewee will not allow tape or video recording.
  - a. Listen not only to what is said, but what is not being said
  - b. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions immediately when the statement is fresh in the mind of the interviewee. (*Note:* This is why good listening habits are essential and where the time spent on preparation is crucial.)
6. Respect periods of silence – the interviewee may need time to remember an event that occurred long ago.
7. Watch for signs of fatigue. If you see that the interviewee is tiring, it is better to schedule a second follow-up interview rather than try forcing the person to continue onward. This is especially true when interviewing an elderly or sick family member.

### **After The Interview**

After you've completed the interview, it is important to review the tapes or videos and label them accordingly. It is a good idea to make a backup copy of each tape, if you have the available resources to do so. Finally, you should establish a method of indexing to assist you in your follow-up research.

### **Script for Oral History Interviews**

I often encounter many genealogists who say they have older family members, friends, or other types of acquaintances that are still alive and would know specific facts about past generations and ancestors. However, they have no idea how to approach them, let alone come up with questions to ask. Your first step would be to prepare a strategy using the information contained in previous sections of this study guide.

This section of your study guide contains what I term a script or guide to formulating questions. The key to success is asking questions that will force the person to provide more than a simple yes or no answer. The questions listed below are broken down by time periods. Feel free to adapt this outline of prospective questions to your own needs.

**Pre-1930 Period****Interview With \_\_\_\_\_**

Your age in 1930 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult

Size of your family in the 1920s. Name of persons in the household & relationship to you.

Residence(s) before 1930, with dates, street, town, state:

When did the family get any of these “modern conveniences”? Telephone, Car, Electricity, Indoor plumbing, running water in the house, vacuum cleaner, electric fans, washing machine, other?

What kind of cooking stove did you or your mother use before 1930? What kind of refrigeration of food?

How was your house heated in the winter?

Did your family own its home? Rent? How much was rent?

What can you tell me about your house(s) before 1930? Rooms? Size? One, two or more stories? Wood, brick, etc.?

Did your family ever experience a house fire? Flood? Other natural disaster? Elaborate.

Were you a student before 1930? How far in school did you go?

How far from your home was school?

Did you have to buy your books or did the school provide them?

What can you tell me about your elementary or high school experiences?

What jobs did family members hold in the 1920s or before? (Did any of the women work outside the home?)

Did you work in the 1920s? Doing what?

How did you decide “what you wanted to be when you grew up”?

What did you do for entertainment in the 1920s or before?

When did you or your family get a radio for the first time? A phonograph?

Did anyone in the family play a musical instrument? Who? What?

How often did you go to the movies? Favorites?

Did the family have pets? Explain.

What part did sports or games play in your life in this period?

During your childhood, what is your earliest memory of home and family? How old were you?

What is your earliest memory of events outside the family? How old were you?

During childhood, what were your favorite toys and games? Did you make any of your toys?

To what extent were family gatherings parts of your life before 1930? Explain.

To what extent were religious activities a part of your life before 1930? Explain.

What, if any, rules governed Sunday or the Sabbath in your home before 1930?

Was dancing allowed in your family? Card playing? Dating without a chaperone?

Were family members restricted in what they could read for pleasure?

What other rules or customs governed behavior?

How did your family celebrate or observe birthdays? Christmas or other religious holidays? July 4?

What wedding or funeral customs do you remember in your family or community in this period?

Do you remember when you or your family got a camera for the first time?

What kind of transportation did you use the most?

How did you get to school or work?

What did the family do at lunchtime? Come home or eat elsewhere? What do you remember about school lunches?

What was the main meal at noon or in the evening? What did you call that meal?

If you lived on a farm, what crops did the family raise? What food?

Did any family members serve in the military in World War I? Who? Where?

How did the family celebrate the end of World War I?

Was this a good period in your life?

How did your experiences before 1930 affect your life thereafter?

## **Depression-1930s**

**Interview with** \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_

Your age in 1930 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult

Size of your family in the 1930s. Names of persons in the household & relationship to you.

Your residence(s) in the 1930s, with dates, street, town, state:

Did the family own its home? Rent? How much was rent?

Did the family have a telephone? Electricity? Electric appliances? Indoor plumbing and running water? What kind of cook stove was used? Which of these were acquired for the first time during the 1930s?

Were you in school anytime in the 30s? What level?

How did the depression affect the students in the family?

How did you or they finance education? (jobs, scholarships, parents, etc.?)

Did elementary and high school students have to buy their own books or did the school provide them?

Did you or your family members have to drop out of school to work? If so, temporarily or permanently?

Who in the family held jobs during the 30s? Doing What? How many hours/day or days/week did you or they work?

Did you or family members have trouble finding a job?

How were you/they able to find work?

Were wages paid in cash, goods, or scrip?

Was the family self supporting? Did you help support your family? Explain.

Was the family a “do-it-yourself” group? If so, explain. Sewing? Carpentry? Making toys? Etc.

How did you or your family “make ends meet”?

Were you or your family able to buy on credit? What items?

Do you remember prices of any items?

What did you do for a recreation or entertainment?

Did you go to movies? How often?

When did you see your first movie with sound? Title?

First movie in color? Title? Favorite movies, stars?

Did your family own and listen to the radio? Favorite programs?

What part did sports and games play in your life in the 1930s?

If you were a child, what were your favorite toys and games?

Did the family have pets? Explain.

What chores were the children and teenagers expected to do?



To what extent were you involved in religious activities in the 1930s? School activities?  
 Which social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations were you involved in?  
 Did you or the family own a car? More than one? What make/model car?  
 Do you remember the price of the car and gasoline?  
 If you had no car, what kind of transportation did you rely on?  
 Did you or family members travel? By what means?  
 Were trips mostly for business or pleasure? (Comments are welcome.)  
 What is your earliest or most vivid memory of home and family? How old were you?  
 In the 1930s, did the family raise, hunt, make, can, preserve any kind of its own food? If so, what items?  
 Which food items were most difficult to obtain?  
 Which were easy to obtain?  
 Did the family have to sacrifice any luxuries or conveniences during the depression? Explain.  
 Did you listen to President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats on the radio? What did you think of him as President during the Depression?  
 Did you or family members work for any of the New Deal agencies (Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, etc.)? What kind of jobs? Where?  
 Did you hear Orson Welles's *The War of the Worlds* on the radio on 30 October 1939? What did you think? Did you or family members believe it was true? Why or why not?  
 How have your experiences during the depression affected your attitudes and life of the present?

### **World War II and the 1940s**

Interview with \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your age in 1940 \_\_\_\_\_ or age group during the war: child teenager young adult adult  
 Size of your family in the 1940s. Names of persons in household & relationship to you.  
 Residence(s) during the war.  
 Residence(s) after the war (1945-1950) with dates, street, town, state.  
 In the 1940s, did you or your family own your home or rent?  
 Which "modern conveniences" did you or your family have before 1940: telephone, radio, electric toaster, mixer, or vacuum cleaner, washing machine, record player, attic or whole-house fan, etc?  
 Did you acquire any of these for the first time after the war and before 1950?  
 Did you or your family acquire television or air conditioning before 1950?  
 After the war, what were some of the first major purchases you or your family made?  
 Were you or your family part of the "rush to the suburbs" after 1945? When? Where?  
 Were you a student during the 1940s? What level? Did you or family members pursue higher education during the war? Who? Where?  
 How did the start of war change your life or plans?  
 Your job(s) during the war. What jobs did other family members have?  
 What kind of work schedule did you have? What were your wages?  
 Who in the family did wartime volunteer work and what kind? Please be specific.  
 What did you do for entertainment during the war years?  
 To what extent were you involved in social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations in the 1940s? Which ones?  
 If you were a child, what were your favorite toys and games?

Did you or your family own a car? More than one? What make/model?  
 What difficulties did you have in keeping it up (repairs, parts, tires, gasoline)?  
 Were you able to travel for pleasure? By car, bus, train? Destination(s)?  
 What were you doing when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941? What was your reaction?  
 Did you hear Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" speech on December 8, 1941? What was your reaction?  
 Were you or family members in military service? Who? Which service? Rank(s)?  
 Were you or family member's volunteers or draftees? When did you or they enter the service?  
 Where were you (they) stationed? Or where did you (they) fight? Please comment.  
 Did your family raise any of its own food during the war? If so, what items?  
 Did your family can or preserve any of its own food? If so, what items?  
 What food items were most difficult to obtain? What food items were easiest to get?  
 What problems did you have in using ration stamps?  
 What commodities (clothes, toilet tissue, appliances, tires, toys, gasoline, etc.) were most difficult to get?  
 What items were not available at all?  
 Did your area experience blackouts? Brownouts? Please comment.  
 Did you rely more on radio, newspapers, movie newsreels, or friends for news?  
 If you were a child, what is your earliest memory of home & family? How old were you?  
 To what extent were you aware of the war?  
 What was your reaction (or your parents') to Roosevelt's decision to seek a fourth term in 1944?  
 What was your reaction (or your parents') at the time to dropping the two atomic bombs in Japan?  
 How did you celebrate the end of the war, either VE or VJ Day? If you were in the military, when did you get home?  
 After the war, did you or family members have difficulty finding work?  
 After the war, how was your life different from what it had been in 1940?  
 How have your World War II experiences affected your attitudes on life?

### **Decade of the 1950s**

Interview with \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your age in 1950 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle appropriate: child teenager young adult adult  
 Size of your family in the 1950s. Name of persons in the family & relationship with you.  
 Residence(s) during the 1950s, with dates, street, town, state:  
 Did your family own its home? How much did the home cost?  
 Did your family rent its home? How much was rent?  
 In what ways was your home different in the 1950s from the 1930s and 1940s?  
 Did you live in a new house? An older house?  
 Which conveniences did you or your family get for the first time in the 1950s? When?  
 Washing machine, clothes dryer, dishwasher, electric or gas cook stove, vacuum cleaner, television, air conditioning  
 If you were in school in this decade, what level? Where?  
 What rules & regulations did your school (s) have?  
 What jobs did you or your family members have in the 1950s?

When did you get your first job? What were your wages/salary?  
 Did you have any job(s) as a teenager? Elaborate.  
 What did you do for recreation and leisure activity in the 1950s?  
 To what extent were sports part of your life in this period? As participant or spectator?  
 What family rules or restrictions governed dating in the 1950s?  
 Was dancing allowed in your family or community? If so, what dances did you enjoy?  
 If you were a child in the 1950s, what were your favorite toys and games?  
 Did you have and ride a bicycle?  
 If you had a TV, what rules or restrictions, if any, governed its use?  
 What were your favorite TV programs?  
 Favorite movies?  
 Did you listen to the radio in the 1950s? Favorite programs?  
 Did you buy phonograph records of popular music? Or other music?  
 Did you have favorite music stars? If so, who?  
 Were you an Elvis Presley fan? Did you go to drive-in movies?  
 What fads or fashions did you enjoy in the 1950s?  
 What organizations (social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal) were you involved in?  
 To what extent were religious activities part of your life in the 1950s? Explain.  
 When and why did you take your first airplane trip? (Even if before 1950)  
 If you were a child or teen, did you get an allowance? How much, how often?  
 What chores, if any, were attached to the allowance?  
 What chores were you or children and teens in your home expected to do in the 1950s?  
 Do you remember prices of anything, including cars, education, appliances and food?  
 Which if any, major news events did you watch on TV? (Eisenhower's inaugurations, Queen Elizabeth II coronation, the McCarthy hearings, etc.)  
 Were you or your family in the military during the Korean War (1950-1953)? Elaborate who, when, where, etc.  
 What was your reaction to the outbreak of the Korean War so soon after WWII?  
 Looking back, what differences, if any, do you see between life in the 40s and the 50s?  
 What "firsts" occurred in your life in the 1950s?  
 What significant events in your life occurred in the 1950s?  
 How would you characterize the 1950s in your life? How did this decade compare to the ones before or after?

### **Decade of the 1960s and Beyond**

Interview with \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewer, date, place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your age in 1960 \_\_\_\_\_ or circle as appropriate: child teenager young adult adult  
 Size of your family in the 1960s. Names of persons in the family & relationship to you.  
 Residence(s) in the 1960s, with dates, town, state:  
 Did your family own its home? When was the home purchased, and at what price?  
 Did your family rent its home? How much was rent?  
 Describe your main residence of the decade. What were its outstanding characteristics, features, amenities?  
 If you were a student during the 1960s, what level, where?  
 What level of schooling did you complete?

What school rules governed dress and behavior for students in your family in the 1960s?

To what extent did your schooling prepare you for your career?

How did you decide what career you would pursue?

What job(s) did you or family members have in the 1960s? Do you remember the level of wages?

If you were a teenager during the 1960s, did you hold any job(s)? Elaborate.

What did you enjoy most for recreation and entertainment in the 1960s?

If you were a child in the 1960s, what were your favorite toys, games, and pastimes?

To what extent was television part of your life in the 1960s?

What family rules, if any, governed the use of television in your home?

To what extent were movies, popular music, and radio part of your life in the 1960s?

To what extent were sports part of your life, as participant or as spectator?

What *family* rules, if any, governed dating and teen activities in the 1960s? (use of car, curfew, dress code, etc.)

What fads and fashions did you enjoy in the 1960s?

Were there fads, fashions, or aspects of popular culture you avoided in the 1960s?

Were you or family members considered “hippies” or “flower children”? Explain.

As a child or teen did you get an allowance? How much, how often?

Were chores attached to allowance? What chores were you or children in your home expected to do in the 1960s?

To what extent were religious activities part of your life in the 1960s?

Which social, civic, service, labor, or fraternal organizations did you participate in?

Did you watch on television or listen on radio to any of these news events? What was your reaction?

- a. First US manned space flight May, 1961
- b. Cuban missile crisis, October, 1962
- c. US military build up in Vietnam from 1963 forward
- d. President John F. Kennedy’s death and funeral, November 1963
- e. Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, April, 1968
- f. Apollo 11 landing on the moon, 20 July 1969
- g. Other?

Were you or any family members involved in anti-war, feminist, or civil rights demonstrations during the 1960s? Who? Where? Elaborate.

Were you or any family member in the military during the Vietnam War? Who? Where? When? Drafted or volunteered?

What “firsts” occurred in your life during the 1960s? (first car, first time to vote, first job, first child, etc.)

What significant events occurred in your own life in the 1960s?

How would you characterize the 1960s in the life of the country? In your personal life?

How did this decade compare to those before or after in your life?

### **13 Steps for Getting the Most Out of Family History Interviews**

Nothing is more exciting to a genealogist than locating a family member, perhaps a second-cousin twice removed, who still lives near the old family homestead and is two generations closer to the old country than you. You’ve succeeded in locating a potential living library of

information. How can you access and capture the wonderful family history resources swimming in your newfound relative's mind? Interviewing family members can be the ideal solution.

While some seasoned genealogists have become old pros at interviewing, the process is often intimidating, especially for beginners. This section of your study guide is designed to provide some tips to help researchers at all levels of expertise to stage a successful interview.

### **1. Develop People Skills**

Clearly, the most important element of the process is the interviewee. Without his or her involvement, your potential source of information is essentially closed. You must be able to approach them in such a way as to make them feel comfortable. They are most likely to help you if they feel they will also benefit from the experience. You need to make them feel wanted and that the information is very important.

### **2. Don't Delay!**

It can be nerve wracking to call someone, even a distant relative, whom you hardly know. So you find yourself stalling. After all, you're busy now. You can always call next month, right? However, if the subject in question should pass away the information dies with them. This is especially true if the family members are of advanced in age or in delicate health. One of our patrons recently lamented on losing two great-aunts within one month of each other. Both parties were the last living members of the family that had first hand knowledge of the time period and locality in which the patron was most interested. The moral of the story is picking up the phone now. The worst that can happen is that they won't be interested, and at least you'll have the peace of mind of knowing you made the effort.

### **3. Making the First Contact**

If you're calling an older relative who will remember you as a child from family events, your call will almost certainly be welcomed. But what if you're contacting someone who's never heard of you? Because we've become so suspicious due to well publicized stories about identity theft and consumer fraud, assume that you must establish proof of your identity and connection to the family as fast as possible. It helps if you can drop some names of common relatives, especially people who are closely related to the person you're calling.

Some genealogists have recommended that family members who might qualify under these criteria might call the prospective interviewee in advance of your contact to establish the legitimacy of your project. If you make the initial call, it is important to establish your relationship by giving out some family tidbits of information and relationships that could only be known by a legitimate member of the family. Usually this opener is met with a somewhat drawn out "yes." You might then add a few more tidbits such as: "And your grandparents were C and D, and C was a blacksmith, right?" By this point, people usually start relaxing because they realize that you know more than a potential scam artist would take time to learn, so this is a good time to explain that you're a genealogist and researching the family history.

### **4. Remain Patient: Avoid the Impulse to Rush**

Given the previous comments about not delaying making calls to a prospective interviewee, especially those in delicate health or advanced age, this may sound hypocritical. What is meant

here is that it might be helpful if you can discipline yourself to refrain from requesting an interview during that first call. Most professionals would recommend establishing some level of rapport and simply talk about that family during the first conversation. Toward the end you may plant a seed by commenting that you expect to be in their area next month (or whatever time frame) and ask if it might be possible to meet. Since the request is non-specific and non-binding, it's easy for them to agree.

After the call, follow up by mailing a packet of materials, generally a pedigree and kinship report from their perspective, perhaps a descendancy chart for the common ancestor (highlight the potential interviewee and yourself, so they can see the connection), and maybe a few copies of family photos. About a week later, call back asking if they received the packet and whether it might be possible to do an interview at a specific date and time. Since they've already had the chance to digest the fact that they're going to be meeting you, the request for an interview is incremental.

At this stage, most will agree, but some will demur because they think they have nothing important to say. Fortunately, because you've already talked with them, you can give some examples of family details they've already shared that were new to you: "I never knew that Uncle Harry served in WWI. I think you know a lot more than you give yourself credit for. I just want to get a sense of what life was like for you and your brothers and sisters." A reassuring manner can go a long way to soothing such concerns.

### **5. Be Up-Front About Your Intentions or Politely "Don't Beat Around the Bush"**

This is also the point where you must state your intentions in terms of recording your meeting. Ask for their permission to tape the interview, and explain that it will save you from having to frantically scribble notes the whole time. Many may hesitate at first, but your genuine interest will usually overcome the initial modesty that's often the root cause of any reluctance. If they flatly refuse to be filmed, ask if audio tape would be acceptable. Barring that, fall back on note-taking. With the proliferation of recording technology, though, resistance to being recorded has greatly diminished in recent years. Simply asking early so they have time to adjust to the idea will do the job in most cases.

### **6. What About Situations Involving Multiple Interviewees in the Same Household? Do I Interview Them Solo or Together?**

You may occasionally run into a situation where there is more than one potential interview candidate. Perhaps a pair of elderly aunts who live together or in close proximity. In that case, should you interview them separately or together? The ideal would be both, but if that's not an option, it's probably best to interview each one individually. While filming clusters of people often makes for lively footage, it also invites confusion and contradiction. It also multiplies the chances that you'll experience some technical difficulties, such as overlapping audio. You may also encounter a situation where one of the parties being interviewed may dominate the interview at the expense of the quieter person. For all these reasons, it's best to work with one person at a time, and then perhaps film the people together chatting about some photos for additional color.

## **7. Preparation: The Key to a Successful Interview**

Now you've arranged the interview. What else do you need to do before you show up at their door? Preparing interview questions is, of course, a critical aspect. Since it is so person-specific, however, it's virtually impossible to cover within the bounds of a single paragraph. For this reason, a list of resources has been provided so you can select the ones most relevant to your situation. Equipment is another key aspect, so we'll address it separately.

Another important pre-interview assignment that both you and the interviewee should take on before you meet – that of gathering photos, documents and other family treasures that might spark memories and make good cutaway footage. Seeing a picture of a favorite pet or the old house can open the floodgates to recollections that have been stashed away for years. And if you've ever watched a documentary, you've noticed how the film-maker intersperses “talking head” shots with cutaways to complementary images that help illustrate the topic being covered. You'll want to borrow this technique for your own interview production, so use the interviews to collect a few such items and go through your own materials to do the same.

## **8. Interview Day: How to Break the Ice**

The day has finally arrived, you've found your way to the interviewee's house, and you're about to meet them for the first time. How do you put them at ease? It helps to bring a small gift, such as flowers. This conveys the message that you're there to get to know them and not simply to film and run. Take a few minutes when you arrive to make small talk about traffic, the weather and so forth – but be careful not to veer into family history. You want to save that for the video!

After a few minutes, ask for their help finding a good spot for the interview and start setting up your equipment. As best as you're able, try to continue the conversation while doing so. Many will be curious to know more about the equipment or your past taping experience, so that makes a convenient, neutral topic to discuss.

Once you've got everything set up, get the interviewee settled and explain some basics. Tell them that they are in control and can stop at any time. In fact, you might want to consider giving them the remote that some cameras come with, so they literally have the ability to stop the interview if they become uncomfortable for any reason. Ask them to tell you if they get tired or thirsty or want a break at any point, and explain that you can stop and start as many times as necessary – or simply stop altogether.

## **9. Position Yourself**

Find a way to situate yourself with your head just to the side of the camera and ask the interviewee to speak directly to you. This has the double advantage of relaxing them (after a while, they'll forget the camera is there) and getting a good angle of their face (if you watch documentaries, you'll rarely see interviewees talking directly to the camera unless it's done for dramatic effect).

Explain in advance that you will need to respond a little slowly and quietly to their comments, so as to avoid stepping on their words. Tell them that you'll be paying attention, but need to be somewhat restrained so you don't interfere with their audio (be prepared to smile and nod a lot and be very expressive!).

## 10. Position Your Questions

This is also a good time to mention that you'll be asking mostly open-ended questions and that they should take as little or as much time as they'd like speaking on any topic. If they don't understand what this term means, politely tell them that the questions will provide them the opportunity to express their feelings and memories versus a simple yes or no answer. It is important at this stage to accentuate the positive.

If the interviewee already seems very comfortable, you can take it a step further by asking them to respond in full sentences by echoing back your questions (e.g., "I was born in Chicago," rather than just "Chicago" in response to the question, "Where were you born?"). This will make your editing job after the fact much easier, but don't mention this if they still seem a little stiff as it will add more pressure. Ultimately, it's your responsibility to get good footage, but some people are on-camera naturals, so tap into that advantage when you spot it!

## 11. How to Handle Delicate, Embarrassing, and Touchy Subjects

We all have some skeletons in our family's closets, so there's a good chance your interview will include a few questions that are a little dicier than others. You've already taken one precaution by letting your interviewee have control of the situation, either directly with a remote or by stopping the process at any time, but there are a few more measures you can take to get through the tougher subjects.

The most important aspect is timing. Always start with "soft" questions, such as the interviewee's name and some just-the-facts details about the family (e.g., names of siblings, place of birth, etc.). Gradually move on to more subjective topics which allow them to share their recollections of school days, wartime experiences, parenting and such. When you get to the touchy subject, treat it just like all the others. Toss out the question and wait for the response. If it's very abrupt, prod gently with a follow-up question or two, but respect their right to sidestep the matter altogether. You may be forced to rephrase the question. That is what lawyers must often do in court when a judge rules they cannot ask a question in a certain manner.

As soon as you detect any squirm-factor, move on to the next topic – a pre-selected, neutral one that will reestablish their comfort level. If you're quick on your feet, you can try circling back to the topic by asking a question on a specific detail or two later, but once again, be willing to move on.

Alternatively, some professionals would recommend briefly halting the interview at such a point to explain the "tell, don't dwell" policy. You might point out that while I (you) don't believe in white-washing history, I also don't believe in wallowing in the more sensational aspects of family history. This often reassures the interviewee that you're not going to make this one controversial pocket of family lore the focus of the tape.

Expect to encounter a wide range of emotions and reactions. Some will make it clear its forbidden territory, some will answer a few questions, and some will embrace the opportunity to finally discuss a topic that's been bottled up in them for so long. One strategy that is somewhat controversial is to emphasize that you know there are two sides to every story and you feel that



they (the interviewee) have never had the opportunity to tell their side. Say it like you mean it even if you don't! You might also try to appeal to their ego and say that you know they were given a bad rap and offer them the opportunity with your help to set the record straight once and for all.

## **12. How to Deal With Incorrect Information, Lies, Rambling, and Silence**

It's bound to happen. Either through misinformation or faulty memories or wishful thinking, or outright stonewalling, your interviewee will probably say something at some point that you know is not quite true. Let it go. Correcting them will only cause them to close up. They'll feel less willing to offer their perspectives on other matters.

When presenting programs on this subject, I am often asked the following question: Should I waste my time trying to interview a family member, friend, acquaintance, etc. who has a reputation for some or all of the following issues:

- a. Stretching the truth to make themselves look good
- b. Evading the truth or any type of touchy situation
- c. Creating deliberate falsehoods
- d. Always looking for a way to settle old scores with anyone whom they felt or perceived slighted them
- e. Always placing the blame on family members who have passed away, hence they are conveniently not around to defend themselves

I always answer the question "yes". My reasoning is based on the passage of time. If a person has lied about a situation or issue, as time passes, everyone's memory will fade to some degree. The odds are that the individual in question may no longer remember all the emotional issues that caused them to feel and do what they did. They may accidentally let some aspect of the truth come out. Even if the memory of the perceived slight is still strong and their anger is still as great as it was as the time of the incident, there is usually a grain of truth in all stories. This is usually true regardless of how sensational they may sound. I have also encountered genealogists who have come to discover that the "Family Black Sheep" was actually telling the truth and other family members were guilty of a cover-up.

The same criteria applies to rambling. Older people especially may jump from subject to subject. When this happens, it's best to go with the flow. You can gently steer them back with your next question, but some of the most interesting stories emerge when you allow the interviewee to free associate and wander a bit. The same applies to long pauses. If you can, resist the urge to fill the gap. A little contemplation is often followed by a particularly compelling comment or story, and your silence demonstrates both respect and a willingness to take whatever time is necessary.

In all of these situations, it's also important to remember that part of what you're capturing is their experience, view, expressions and gestures – not just the data. You can decide later in the editing phase how best to handle any misinformation, tangents or extended pauses, but now is not the time.

### 13. Technology Tips

Let's turn our attention now to the technical side of interviewing – more specifically, the dos and don'ts of digital taping & recording.. Numerous books have been written on the subject, but we'll focus on a handful of tips that can dramatically affect the quality of your finished product:

#### a. Check and Check Again:

It is critical to check all your equipment before you go. You just never know when a camera or microphone is going to refuse to cooperate, so it's best to learn in advance and without an audience. Also make sure everything is ready to go. Batteries should be pre-charged, tapes should be pre-labeled (as much as possible), etc.

#### b. Don't Spare the Spares:

Once you've checked everything, plan for more surprises by bringing as many back-ups as possible. Have spare batteries of all types, as well as chargers and adapters (one battery can be re-charging while you're using another or you can plug in if necessary). Extension cords and power strips are always a good idea, as the people you wish to interview may be elderly and live in older homes that don't have as many outlets as newer ones. Light bulbs, cables and microphones are other items worth duplicating.

Bring plenty of tapes – several more than you anticipate using. While most interviews are just an hour or two, you may encounter an interviewee that will talk much longer. Be prepared for all eventualities and scenarios. Failure to do so may result in information being missed. Try to use high-quality, but long-running tapes, so you don't have to interrupt the process often for tape switches (and when you do so, re-ask the last question you left off with just to make sure you get a complete answer).

#### c. Carry a Second Camera:

There was a time when the suggestion to bring an extra camera would have sounded ridiculous, but many of us now have more than one camera or camcorder or can easily borrow a second from someone. At a minimum, the second can serve as a reserve, but it can also be used for cutaway shots.

To give yourself greater flexibility in the editing process (not to mention, add interest to the final video), it's a good idea to film photos, the family Bible and other relevant memorabilia. To jazz it up still more, take stills, pans (slow horizontal movement, usually left to right) and zooms (slowly closing in or drawing away from an item).

Another advantage to using two cameras is that you can film the whole interview twice simultaneously. In addition to acting as "insurance" should one camera go down for any reason, you can position them (using the tripods you've brought) so that one captures a close-up and the other a mid-range shot. This will again enhance the editing process because you'll have more creative license. You may, for instance, want to use primarily a mid-range image interspersed with occasional close-ups (for special or dramatic topics or cutaways). You may find your second-cousin fascinating, but others may be less willing to watch a solid hour of someone sitting in a chair talking. Mixing it up will go a long way toward improving the entertainment value of your video.

**d. To Mike or Not to Mike:**

Most camcorders come with built in microphones, so do you really need to get a separate mike to clip on to the interviewee? If you ever have cause to edit a tape that was filmed with just the camcorder's audio, you'll quickly understand why the answer is yes. The interviewee might have a soft voice that's difficult to pick up or they just might speak quietly at some point. You'll get too much background noise or someone will knock on the door just when an important point is being made.

Unfortunately, even with all the technology we have today, there's not much that can be done after the fact to rectify these situations, so it's better to play it safe, invest in a microphone (or two or three), and clip it on to the interviewee. Some actually like this little extra step because it makes the interview feel more official and important.

**e. Location, Location, Location** - We hear this refrain with regard to real estate and marketing all the time, but it's also fitting when it comes to taping interviews. Since you'll often be filming in the interviewee's house – a place you will probably be seeing for the first time when you arrive – your choices will likely be limited and you'll have to make them quickly. You'll have to make the best of what's available, but here are a few factors to take into account:

- (1) Interviewee's comfort – a favorite chair makes a good choice
- (2) Space – try to find a place where there's enough room for all your equipment
- (3) Light – avoid that murky look by seeking a spot with as much natural light as possible to supplement whatever sources are available in the house and whatever you've brought (consider outside if necessary)
- (4) Activity – it's probably not a good idea to set up in the patio next to the street or in front of a window
- (5) Noise – see if you can get permission to unplug the phone and look for other less obvious noisemakers, such as refrigerators, icemakers, air conditioners and bathrooms that might be avoidable
- (6) If necessary (and it probably will be, especially if you use lighting and/or a second camera), ask for permission to temporarily move a few pieces of furniture to make enough room for the equipment in a place that's otherwise promising.

**f. Better Safe Than Sorry:**

Once you have everything set up, record a few seconds of sample footage and audio to adjust the lighting and sound if necessary. For example, ask the interviewee to recite the alphabet or a poem. Last minute adjustments are a nuisance, but it's better to make them now than to struggle with them during editing.

**g. Parting Words:**

Once you've reached the end of your questions, always ask the interviewee if there's anything they'd like to talk about that you haven't already covered. While they'll usually decline the offer, this may spontaneously lead to some unexpected morsels or perhaps a summary of the person's philosophy of life. Broad comments such as

“Family is what matters most” are common at this stage and might make a nice conclusion to your presentation.

When the formal interview is over, you’ll need to take some time breaking down your equipment and cleaning up. If you’ve got a spare camera or perhaps an audio recorder, try to keep it running through most of this time. It’s a peculiar and somewhat frustrating reality that some of the most interesting commentary will often come spilling out at this time. It’s hard to say why this phenomenon occurs, but if there’s any way you can delay powering down your audio devices a bit, it’s worth doing.

#### **h. Wrapping Up:**

It goes without saying that you’ll thank your interviewee and perhaps provide a copy for them. If you’re a prudent genealogist, you’ll also make back-up copies of your tapes at the earliest opportunity. And of course, you’ll probably want to spruce it up a bit with some editing equipment or software, but even if you don’t, you’ve created a time capsule that your extended family will treasure for years to come. Now, it’s time to start planning your next interview or better yet, get someone to interview you.

### **Online Sources of Additional Information and Strategies**

#### **AARP – How to Create and Oral Family History**

<https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-07-2013/oral-family-history-tree-stories.html>

#### **Afrigeneas**

##### **Center for Life Stories Preservation**

<http://www.afrigeneas.com/forum-writers/index.cgi/md/read/id/730/sbj/center-for-life-stories-preservation/>

**Cyndi’s List** ([www.cyndislist.com/oral.htm](http://www.cyndislist.com/oral.htm)): As with all the topics Cyndi covers, this is a comprehensive list of links for you to explore. Of particular interest is the Publications, Software & Supplies section which will steer you to books and other items you might like to purchase to learn more.

#### **Family Search Wiki – African-American Oral History**

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/African\\_American\\_Oral\\_History](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/African_American_Oral_History)

#### **Family Search Wiki – Creating Oral Histories**

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating\\_Oral\\_Histories](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating_Oral_Histories)

**History Detectives: Oral History PBS**

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/technique/oral-history/>

**Judith Moyer**

Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History

[http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

**L. Dale Patterson. Doing Oral History.**

Online: Archival Leaflet Series, the General Commission on Archives and History, the United Methodist Church. <http://www.gcah.org/resources/archival-leaflets-oral-history>

**New York Public Library – Interviews for Genealogical Research**

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/01/07/conducting-interviews-genealogical-research>

**Story Corps**

<https://storycorps.org/>

This organization goes throughout the country seeking stories from people in all walks of life. They are especially interested in people that talk about historical events that impacted them as individuals, community events, first-hand accounts of life experiences, etc. You can request a Story Kit (do-it-yourself recording package) or use the site's Question Generator to create a list of questions for an interview.

**Thought.com – Kimberly Powell**

**Top 10 Memory Books: Journals With Questions for Preserving Family Memories**

<https://www.thoughtco.com/journals-with-questions-preserving-family-memories-1422103>

**UCLA Library – Conducting Oral Histories With Family Members**

<https://www.library.ucla.edu/location/library-special-collections/destination/center-oral-history-research/resources/conducting-oral-histories-family-members>

**US GenWeb – Rootsweb**

**A Script for Video or Audio Interviews with Family Members**

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~lineage/famhist.htm>

Just what the title says – a recommended list of generic questions suitable for most family history interviews.

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**NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers Regional Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.**

Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Ft. Myer Regional Library,  
4/22/2022

## DNA Testing and Family Relationships



The impact of DNA testing and genealogical research has become one of the most fascinating and popular trends in genealogy. The number of commercials featuring advertising for DNA testing has accelerated. USA Today recently ran a cover story of the top companies based on their rating system that offered these types of services. The Link for their story is <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/12/02/genealogical-dna-testing-companies-ancestry-23-andme/2141344002/>. There is another company, GPS Origins, which has developed a test that covers the same territory and offers specific information on migration patterns.

The top companies they cited are listed below:

1. 23andMe
2. Family Tree DNA
3. Ancestry DNA
4. My Heritage
5. Living DNA

While genealogical research tends to be the most popular focal point for many people, another of increasing interest revolves around health. In recent years, a growing number of smaller DNA testing companies have entered the testing field. These companies offer tests that focus more on helping people identify life style and health choices that may enhance the quality of life. These tests may also identify potential medical and health concerns that can be addressed for the future. Some of the testing companies in this area of expertise include:

1. Vitagene



2. Nutrisystem
3. Living DNA
4. Orig3n
5. Future Genetics

All of these companies are featured in the following link in an advertisement from 2019 at the following link:

[https://www.top10bestdnatesting.com/?utm\\_source=google&kw=dna%20testing%20companies&c=318365956709&t=search&p=&m=e&adpos=1t2&dev=c&devmod=&mobval=0&network=g&campaignid=718013754&adgroupid=54401616459&targetid=kwd-511526889&interest=&physical=9012206&feedid=&a=7003&ts=&gclid=Cj0KCCQiA4aXiBRCRARIsAMBZGz91PghLU5TZZqOsDZIYr8MSPEBSElswansoasw4ggYk5A1gS8o9rOAAmwiEALw\\_wcB](https://www.top10bestdnatesting.com/?utm_source=google&kw=dna%20testing%20companies&c=318365956709&t=search&p=&m=e&adpos=1t2&dev=c&devmod=&mobval=0&network=g&campaignid=718013754&adgroupid=54401616459&targetid=kwd-511526889&interest=&physical=9012206&feedid=&a=7003&ts=&gclid=Cj0KCCQiA4aXiBRCRARIsAMBZGz91PghLU5TZZqOsDZIYr8MSPEBSElswansoasw4ggYk5A1gS8o9rOAAmwiEALw_wcB)

Recent stories where DNA test results have played a prominent role in solving multiple cold-case crimes throughout the country have added to the interest. DNA is the essence of all living beings and tells elaborate stories about where we came from, who we are, and where we're going. Thanks to ongoing advances in technology, new information continues to appear which has allowed researchers to verify or call into question, countless old stories and theories about migration, ethnicity, race, and personal identity.

Recently one media commentator said that in his opinion, the most basic lesson he learned was that physical resemblance, no matter how striking, between two people was no guarantee of any type of ancestral relationship. On the other hand, this same commentator said that if it were possible for us to go back far enough in time, everyone would eventually locate a common ancestor. DNA generates opinions on all sides of the science and philosophy spectrum.

Like any type of product, DNA testing has its Pros and Cons. The Pros of DNA Testing include the following:

- 1. Family Planning:** DNA testing can help parents with family related health conditions make important decisions regarding whether or not to have children or adopt. Test results may indicate a low or high risk of passing along a genetic condition. This information can play a major role in helping people obtain a higher quality of life.
- 2. Preventive Medical Treatments:** DNA testing for this topic is very controversial. In spite of some of the comments that have circulated in social media, and on television programs featuring Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz, and others, anyone contemplating using these tests for this reason should **consult with their family or personal physician before taking any action.** DNA tests may reveal medical conditions or unknown genetic disorders. This information may allow the person to seek out early medical treatment that will save, prolong, or improve their quality of life. With the constant advances in medical technology available in our modern world, research has proven that with early diagnosis, most existing medical conditions and potential genetic disorders may be mitigated or eliminated through diet, exercise, and making better lifestyle choices. **The operative word is may.**
- 3. Supplement Genealogy Research:** Patrons hoping to enhance clues related to genealogy and family history often use testing. With many of the major DNA testing websites, you can discover

information on where your ancestors came from and what percentage of your DNA belongs to different ethnicities, and increasingly narrow it down to specific towns, countries, and regions.

The Cons of DNA testing may include:

**1. Family Issues:** Family relationships can be complicated. Tests may reveal that their parents aren't their actual parents, or even that a child isn't their biological child. This may be good in certain scenarios, but for other people ignorance is bliss. While some people are outraged when a situation like this occurs, the following statement is contained in the fine print on all DNA test kits: DNA testing can come with identity-disrupting surprises, be it an unexpected relative, genetic condition, or ethnic heritage. Unfortunately, not all users take the time to read the fine print.

**2. Privacy Concerns:** In this age of concerns about identity theft and our personal information, people may be leery about giving your DNA to a company and asking them to develop a full profile about who you are. While most companies have strict privacy laws in place, there's always the possibility that future employers or insurance companies could obtain these results and deny you some sort of service. With the recent publicity surrounding law enforcement, using DNA to solve multiple highly publicized cold cases, this debate has become more intense.

**3. Negative Medical or Health Issues:** When people who think they are perfectly healthy take a DNA test and learn that they carry a genetic disorder; it is often challenging to deal with the results. Even with the major technological improvements in health care and medicine, the psychological impact of finding out about this type of issue can have major implications for some.

On overall balance, the majority of people feel that DNA testing has far more long-term advantages than disadvantages. Researchers and patrons should take the time to visit the website for all of these companies, read the reviews, and read all of the information pertaining to the test results, and policies/procedures concerning the privacy of compiled information.

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BLM 3/19/2019