

How to preserve your family's history.

By Gary Karton

Here's some advice about how to interview your relatives and keep your own family's stories alive for future generations.

- **Prepare and listen.** Write down a list of topics (parents, schooling, adventures), not specific questions, for the interview. This will allow you to make the interview more of a conversation. See where it leads, and then go with it. "Your interviewee doesn't have a script," says Fogerty. "You shouldn't, either."
- **Start the interview slowly.** "This might be the first time they've ever been interviewed," reminds Ransom. "So they have to warm up to this." Ransom says to start with questions they can easily answer and work your way into the deeper issues. "If you know your grandfather had a brother who died and it was very emotional for him, you obviously don't want to start there."
- **Be reassuring.** There are times when your grandmother or elderly uncle might get emotional during the interview. "Just stop for a moment, turn off the recorder, take a deep breath and say, 'Let's just sit for a moment.' Let the person compose themselves and then go on," says Fogerty.
- **Use pictures.** Bring a photo album, newspaper clips or photographs to the interview. "It gets people talking," says Jeff Lewellen, who has been an archivist at the Arkansas History Commission for 21 years. "People see an image and then they remember all kinds of great little details."
- **Get started now.** "One hundred years from now, someone will be thankful that you took the time and expense to keep these memories alive," says Ransom. "So do it. I promise, you won't regret it."

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Questions to Ask

When interviewing relatives for a family history, try to ask questions that will elicit stories, not just facts. Ask open-ended questions instead of ones with "yes" or "no" answers. And, don't forget to ask about people's daily lives, which can offer some wonderful details and stories. Here are a few suggestions:

- Let's start with the basics. What is your full name? When and where were you born? Where did you live when you were growing up? Where did you go to school?
- Tell me about your family. What were your parents' names? Where were they born? What did they do for a living?

- Who were your brothers or sisters? Were they older or younger? What did you like to do with them when you were younger?
- What were your grandparents' names? Where and when were they born? Where did they live? What did they do for a living?
- Who was the person who most influenced your life? Can you tell me a story about them? Can you tell me about a time when you relied on their guidance or advice in your own life?
- Tell me your memories of going to church with your family as a child.
- If you had your life to live over, what would you change? Why?
- Tell me about a typical day or week in your childhood (or other time in your life).
- What are you most proud of accomplishing in your life? Why?
- What was the saddest day in your life, and why? How did you recover from it?
- How would you like to be remembered? Advice for future generations?

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