

# INTERVIEWING

Obtaining information through personal interviews is one of the most fulfilling ways a family historian uncovers the past and finds missing pieces of the present. But before you run off with pages of questions for your grandmother, elderly uncle or cousin to answer, consider these points to make it a more successful interview.

Prepare for the interview. Take a tape recorder (be sure to ask their permission to use it), extra tapes and batteries, a note pad, and a list of areas you want to pursue. A great technique is to bring along pictures or documents to show them. This will often spark memories and help them recall details about other individuals.

Ask opened ended questions, ones that go beyond just facts or yes/no answers. Ask about peoples traits, habits, qualities, stories, and so forth. Consider asking about the time period - what was life like "back then"? I do recall my grandma mentioning how scared everyone was during the flu epidemics in the early 1900s. Remember though that asking questions without a personal focus on the interviewee could come off as an interrogation. For example, if you're asking Grandma how she met Grandpa, rather than simply asking, "How did you meet Grandpa?" you might say, "How did you, a young woman from Iowa, ever have the opportunity to meet a man from upstate New York?"

Don't jump time lines. It's difficult and sometimes confusing for people to be asked to jump back and forth in their minds to different parts of their lives. Allow the memories to flow in natural progression.

Memories are emotional as well as visual and even the most pleasant ones can be exhausting to relive, particularly for the elderly. You may have to end a session before you're ready. If your subject has found your visit pleasant he or she will be willing, even eager, to have you back.

Respect any unwillingness to discuss certain subjects or events. As eager as you may be to get the information, you have no "right" to it. Remember, there is no "Freedom of Information Act" within families.

Hopefully, these few points of interviewing etiquette will make your visit with your relative or family friend more comfortable, and if it is true that the only value in life is love and knowledge then you may well come away with both.

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Some related sources:

DearMYRTLE article on interviewing:

<http://www.ancestry.families.aol.com/lessons/beginners/lesson21.htm>

Pointers and some suggested questions:

<http://kwthompson.homepage.com/gny/Misc/interview1.htm>

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The "Art of Interviewing Relatives":

[http://www.cimorelli.com/pie/library/intr\\_art.htm](http://www.cimorelli.com/pie/library/intr_art.htm)

Oral history interview tips:

<http://www.ugrr.org/ugrr/gene/oral-que.htm>

"How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies" by Bill Zimmerman (Available at Your Family Legacy).

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