

A Guide to Reading Early Handwriting

Family Chronicle

The Magazine for Families Researching their Roots

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◀ The Art of the Interview:

How to get the most out of your family history interviews

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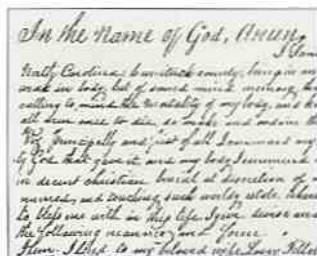
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The Art of the Interview

Megan Smolenyak offers advice on getting the most out of family history interviews.

SO YOU'VE LOCATED A second-cousin twice removed who still lives near the old family homestead and is two generations closer to the old country than you. Congratulations, you've just discovered a living library! But how can you access and capture the wonderful family history resources swimming in your newfound relative's mind? An interview is an ideal solution.

Maybe you're an old pro at interviewing, but for many of us, it can be intimidating — especially the first time. I've had the pleasure of interviewing assorted relatives and once produced a local access television show, so I'd like to share a series of tips concerning both the "soft" people side of the equation as well as technical aspects. I've mostly learned through trial and error, but it's my hope that you'll find an idea or two here that will shorten your learning curve and possibly spare you a couple of mishaps or regrets.

People Skills

Clearly, the most important part of the process is the interviewee. Without his or her involvement, that library of information is essentially closed to the public, so let's start there.

Don't Delay!

Yes, I know, it can be scary calling someone — even a distant relative — you don't know. So you find yourself stalling. After all, you're busy now. You can always call next month, right? Speaking as someone who just lost her last two great-aunts within 10 days of each other, I implore you to pick up the phone now. Put down this article if you must, but make the contact imme-

diately. 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.



Situate yourself slightly to one side of the camera and ask the interviewee to respond directly to you, rather than to the camera.

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, you'll need to establish your bona fides quickly. I've found that quickly dropping the names of common relatives helps — especially people who are closely related to the person you're calling. I'll often start by saying, "This is a little unusual and you don't know me, but my name is X and I think that we're distantly related. If you're the person I'm hoping to find, your parents would have been Y and Z from place Q."

Usually this opener is met with a somewhat cautious and drawn out "yes," so I'll take the opportunity to add a few more tidbits: "And your grandparents were C and D, and C was a blacksmith, right?" By this point, people usually start relaxing because they real-

ize that you know more than a potential scam artist would trouble learning, so this is a good time to explain that you're a genealogist and researching the family's roots.

Don't Rush

A few paragraphs ago, I advised you not to delay, and now I'm saying just the opposite. What I mean here is that it might be helpful if you can discipline yourself to refrain from requesting an interview during that first call. I generally like to establish a rapport and simply talk about the family during the first conversation. Toward the end, I like to plant a seed by commenting that I expect to be in their area next month (or whatever time frame) and ask if it might be possible for us

to meet. Since the request is non-specific and not binding, it's easy for them to agree.

After the call, I follow up by mailing a packet of materials — generally a pedigree and kinship report from their perspective, perhaps a descendency 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, I'll 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.

It's All Important

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 for you and your brothers and sisters." A reassuring manner can go a long way to soothing such concerns.

Be Up-Front

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. Even notes from an interview are better than no interview at all. 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.

Solo or Together?

You may occasionally run into a situation where there is more than one potential interview candidate. Perhaps an elderly pair of aunts live together, for example. 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. And great-aunt Jewel might dominate the interview at the expense of the quieter great-aunt

Mildred. 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.

Get Your Stuff Together

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



Using two cameras will allow you to mix colorful, close-up views with more conventional mid-range shots.

so person-specific, however, it's virtually impossible to cover within the bounds of a single article. 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. But there's one other homework assignment 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 ask the interviewee

to collect a few such items and go through your own materials to do the same.

Breaking 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.

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!).

Position Your Questions

This is also a good time to mention that you'll be asking mostly open-ended questions (i.e., ones that can't be answered with a simple yes or no), and that they should take as little or as much time as they'd like speaking on any topic.

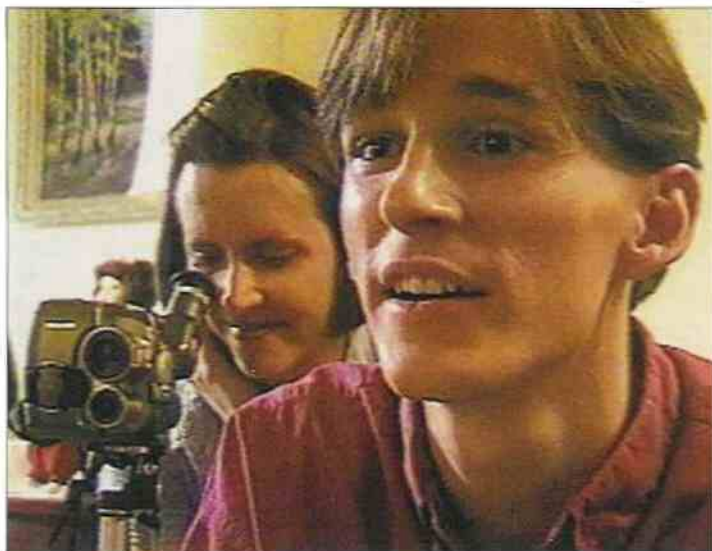
If the interviewee already seems very comfortable, you can take it a step further by asking them to respond in full sentences by echoing back your questions (e.g., "I was born in Chicago," rather than just "Chicago" in response to the question, "Where were you born?"). This will make your editing job 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!

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.



It helps to be visibly expressive in your reactions since you'll want to avoid interfering with the interviewee's audio.

If it's very abrupt, prod gently with a follow-up question or two, but respect their right to sidestep the matter altogether.

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, I've had success with briefly halting the interview at such a point to explain my "tell, don't dwell" policy. I explain that while I don't believe in white-washing history, I also don't believe in wallowing in the more sensational aspects of the 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.

You'll get a range of reactions. Some will make it clear it's 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. I've certainly had this last experience with regard to the fact that one of my great-grandmothers was murdered by her husband. Since the incident occurred in 1932, some are not only willing to talk about it, but truly want to.

Incorrect Information, Rambling and Silence

It's bound to happen. Either through misinformation or faulty memories or wishful thinking, 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.

The same 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.

Technology Tips

Let's turn our attention now to the technical side of interviewing — more specifically, the dos and don'ts of video-taping. Numerous books have been written on the

Interview Resources

There's a lot more to oral history than using open-ended questions and starting with "soft" ones. Here's a selection of some of the best resources for helping you customize your questions and get the most out of your interview:

Center for Life Stories (www.storypreservation.com/home.html): This site has everything, including countless questions and examples, as well as links to virtually every other website of interest. Be sure to look at the Memory Triggers and Story Topics categories.

Cyndi's List (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.

Capturing the Past (www.byubroadcasting.org/capturingpast/): The people who brought you both Ancestors series on PBS cover the essentials of oral history. Also available through Direct Cinema Limited (www.directcinema.com) is a half-hour video on the topic.

Oral History Questions (www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/oralhist.htm): A handy list of questions that will work for many interviews in case you don't have enough time to frame your own.

A Script for Video or Audio Interviews with Family Members (www.rootsweb.com/~lineage/famhist.htm): Just what the title says — a recommended list of generic questions suitable for most family history interviews.

Capture the Memories Interview Books (www.myancestorsfound.com/cmbooks.html): A collection of 14 interview books for or about specific people (mother, father, etc.) and topics (e.g., Christmas, railroads, etc.).

StoryCorps (www.storycorps.net): If all of this is just too overwhelming, keep it simple by tapping into this national initiative to "instruct and inspire Americans to record one another's stories in sound." For \$10 US and an investment of one hour, you'll walk away with an audio interview on CD. While StoryCorps booths are only available in New York City at present, you can rent a StoryKit (do-it-yourself recording package) or use the site's Question Generator to create a list of questions for an interview.

subject, but we'll focus on a handful of tips that can dramatically affect the quality of your finished product.

Check and Check Again

I'll be the first to admit that it's tedious, but it is critical to check all your equipment before you go. At the local access station where I produced my show, it was actually required before you could check out equipment. Technology is temperamental. 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.

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.

And always bring plenty of tapes — several more than you anticipate using. While most interviews are just an hour or two, I once had an interviewee astound me by going literally all day. Some amazing material would have been missed if I hadn't come with a stash of tapes. 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).

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). This way, when Grandma remarks on the family Bible, you can use her voice as narration over footage of the actual Bible.

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 reactions) and 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.

To Mike or Not to Mike

Most camcorders come with built-in microphones, so do you really need to go out and 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.

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:

- Interviewee's comfort — a favorite chair makes a good choice
- Space — try to find a place where there's enough room for all your equipment
- 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)
- Activity — it's probably not a good idea to set up in the patio

next to the street or in front of a window

- Noise — see if you can get permission to unplug the phone and look for other less obvious noise-makers, such as refrigerators, ice-makers, air conditioners and bathrooms that might be avoidable

If necessary (and it probably



Gathering photos and other memorabilia in advance will help trigger memories.

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.

Better Safe Than Sorry

Once you have everything set up, tape a few seconds of sample footage and audio (ask the interviewee to recite the alphabet or a poem) and rewind to see what it looks like. This will help you discover, for instance, that the light from one side of the room is washing out your interviewee's face and needs to be shifted. Last minute adjustments are a nuisance, but it's better to make them now than to struggle with them during editing.

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 video.

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.

Wrapping Up

Good job! Now you've got your oral history! 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, time to start planning your next interview or better yet, get someone to interview you. After all, you're a living library, too!

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