



Grandma Said What? Gathering and Verifying Your Family's Oral History

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Oral History comprises the undocumented stories and details of our families, passed from one generation to the next. By compiling our oral history and then searching for records which were created near the time of the events, we should be able to determine the accuracy of this history.

Choosing Candidates for Interviews:

The oldest living generation should be your priority

Grandparents and parents

Aunts, uncles of any generation

Cousins of any generation

Yourself and your siblings

Friends, associates, and neighbors

Libraries, Archives, Universities

Interview Tips:

Ask permission to use the information they provide, and to record the interview.

Ask focused questions which are also open-ended.

Allow your interviewee to wander down memory lane a little.

Keep note-taking during the interview to a minimum, focusing on the person you are interviewing.

Use photographs, newspaper articles, or heirlooms to prompt memories.

Make copies of photos and give each a unique identifier so you can match them to the narrative.

Recording Tips:

Arrange a convenient time and select a quiet space to work to avoid background noise.

Record an introduction for each file; your name and their name, the date, and the subject.

Provide a lapel microphone for quiet speakers.

Standalone digital recorders should have a USB connection to transfer your files.

Many voice recording apps are available for smartphones, or you can use your laptop.

Backup your files, and share them if you have permission.

Verifying the Story:

Even though not every story is verifiable, we should at least try to do so, because any part of a family story could be incorrect, from individual facts to the entire stories. These discrepancies can result from one of many factors:

Embellishment

Whitewashing

Bias and perspective

Outright lying

Getting stuck in a falsehood

Omission of information

Simple errors in memory

The Telephone Game effect

The Genealogical Proof Standard:

Step 1: Reasonably Exhaustive Research

Identify all the records (sources) which might provide an answer to our question.
As much as possible, look at the original record, rather than relying on an index.

Step 2: Complete, accurate source citations

See *Evidence Explained*.

Step 3: Analysis and Correlation of the Data

Evaluate the quality of each record you find.
Compare the information in each record against the other records you have located.
Compare the information in each record against the story.

Step 4: Resolution of any Conflicts

Determining why information is in disagreement.

Step 5: Written Conclusion

Telling others what you know and how you know it.

Suggested Records—a brief list	
Vital Records (Birth, Marriage, Death)	Church Records (Baptisms, Marriage, Holy Orders)
Newspaper Articles	City Directories
Military Records	Letters and Diaries
Census Records (Federal, State)	Court Records (Civil and Criminal)
Divorce	Land Records
Tax Records	Passenger Lists
Voter Records	Naturalization Applications
Wills, Probates	Family Bibles
Photographs	Yearbooks
Pension Files	Professional Association archives
Cemetery, Funeral Home Records	County Histories

Bibliography & Resources

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3. Filby, P. William, compiler. *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1985).
4. Legacy Stories www.legacystories.com
5. Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2024).
6. Morton, Sunny. *My Life and Times: A Guided Journal for Collecting Your Stories* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Family Tree Books, 2011).
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Interview Questions – Part One – Family Tree

Yourself

1. What is the name you were given at birth /appears on your birth certificate?
2. Were you named after a relative or family friend? Why was your name chosen?
3. Have you ever had a nickname? Who gave it to you and why?
4. When were you born? Where? Hospital or at home?
5. Are you now or have you ever been married?
6. What is your spouse's name?
7. Where/how did you meet your spouse(s)?
8. When and where did you get married?
9. Do you have any children? If so, what are their names, date and place of birth?
10. If any of your children are married, what are their spouse(s) names?
11. When/Where were your children married?
12. Do you have any grandchildren? If so, what are their names and birth date?

Parents

13. What is your mother's name?
14. When and where was she born? Hospital or at home?
15. Is she still alive? When did she die? What was her cause of death, if known?
16. Where was she buried?
17. What is your most vivid image of your mother?

18. What is your father's name?
19. When and where was he born? Hospital or at home?
20. Is he still alive? When did he die? What was his cause of death, if known?
21. Where was he buried?
22. What is your most vivid image of your father?

23. Where/how did your parents meet?
24. When and where did they get married?
25. Did either of your parents have any other spouses?

Siblings

26. What are your brothers' and sisters' names?
27. When and where were they born?
28. Are any of them married, and if so, what are their spouse's names?
29. Do you have any nieces/nephews?
30. What are their names and when and where were they born?

Grandparents

31. What were the names of your mother's parents?
32. When and where were they born and where did they live?
33. What did they do for a living?
34. How did your grandparents meet?
35. When/where did they get married?
36. When did they die? What were their causes of death, if known?
37. Where are they buried?

38. What were the names of your father's parents?
39. When and where were they born and where did they live?
40. What did they do for a living?
41. How did your grandparents meet?
42. When/where did they get married?

Interview Questions – Part One – Family Tree

43. When did they die? What were their causes of death, if known?
44. Where are they buried?
45. Which of your Grandparents did you meet?

Extended Family

46. Did your mother have any siblings?
47. What were their names?
48. When and where were they born?
49. If they married, what was their spouse's name?
50. If they had children, what were their names?
51. Are your Aunts/Uncles still alive? When did they die? What was their cause of death, if known?
52. Where are they buried?

53. Did your father have any siblings?
54. What were their names?
55. When and where were they born?
56. If they married, what was their spouse's name?
57. If they had children, what were their names?
58. Are your Aunts/Uncles still alive? When did they die? What was their cause of death, if known?
59. Where are they buried?

60. What do you remember hearing about your GREAT Grandparents?
61. Did you ever meet them?

62. From what part of the world did your family emigrate? Any stories told in your family about the crossing? Did they become U.S. citizens? Do you have any relatives in foreign countries?
63. Where did they settle in this country? Why?

64. Do you have any relatives who were famous? Or who took part in well-known historical events?
65. How far back can you trace your family tree? (Pedigree chart)

Wrap Up Questions

1. Are there family stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, or elopements?
2. Would you be willing to take the Ancestry autosomal DNA test?
3. The following records would assist me in documenting our family history for my future reference and future historians. Would you be willing to provide copies* of these records for my reference/collection?
 - Birth
 - Marriage
 - Divorce
 - Death (of spouses/children, if applicable)

Final Question

What haven't we talked about that you'd like to discuss in the time we have left?

Family History Interview Consent Form

Date: _____

I hereby grant _____ permission to document through audio and/or video recording and transcription oral history interview(s) for the purpose of protection, preservation, and encouragement of history, culture, tradition, and heritage. The information I agree to share with the interviewer is to be used solely for the purposes of recording my personal history and/or recollections. The knowledge contained in the oral histories will be used to compile a history of the _____ and _____ families and it may be published in a book about the same at a later date.

This consent does not preclude any use which I may personally want to make of the information contained in the recordings or transcription.

During the interviewee's lifetime there will be no disclosure of information which could potentially be a threat to their personal security (identity fraud protection), without additional and separate consent.

The interviewer does not erase sections of the recording. You may restrict portions of your interview, or establish special terms of use for sensitive sections. When a transcript is made, you will have the opportunity to edit the text. Acceptable editing includes correction of factual errors, name spelling, and typos. If you wish, you may delete or restrict particular remarks or sections.

I wish to place the following restrictions on the information contained in the recording made:

During my lifetime information from this interview is only available to close family members.

Other restrictions, as detailed below

No restrictions.

I would like a copy of any interview recording and transcript to be given to:

Myself

Other Individual or Entity

Signature of Interviewee

Signature of Interviewer

Name

Name

Date

Date