



Salmon Reserve

RECORDING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

*A Guide to Preserving
Oral History with
• Videotape • Audiotape
• Suggested Topics and Questions
• Interview Techniques*

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25 SEP 1992 02:02 PM ML11

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Family History	15
Childhood	36
Youth	51
Middle Age	108
Old Age	114
Narrator as Parent	133
Grandchildren	165
Historical Events	177
General Questions, Unusual Life Experiences, and Personal Philosophy and Values	217
Special Questions for Jewish Narrators	290
Special Questions for Black Narrators	295
Special Questions for Hispanic-American Narrators	300
Further Reading	307
Index	308

For inquire, I pray thee, of the former age,
 And apply thyself to that which their fathers
 have searched out
 (For we are but of yesterday, and know
 nothing
 because our days upon earth are a shadow):
 Shall not they teach thee, and tell thee,
 and utter words out of their heart?

The Book of Job

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to
 say.
 The oldest hath borne most; we that are
 young
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

King Lear

Go to old Nestor, master charioteer,
 So we may broach the storehouse of his mind.
 Ask him with courtesy, and in his wisdom
 he will tell you history and no lies.

The Odyssey

"Grandpa, tell me 'bout the good 'ol days . . ."

The Judds (Country song, © 1986)

Introduction



This book is designed to help you conduct an autobiographical oral history—a "Life History Interview"—with an elderly relative or friend, and preserve it on audio- or videotape for future generations. It's fun, interesting, and easy to do, and it creates a unique emotional legacy for you and for the younger members of your narrator's family.

Such a project meets a deep need of most older persons to tell their story for posterity, and it fills an equally strong need in younger people to hear and know about the past and to find their place in the continuity of their family's experience. And the experience for you, the interviewer, in conducting these sessions, is priceless. Feelings and stories you may never have touched on or heard about will come up in these sessions, in a context that has great meaning for you and for the other members of your family. If you undertake such a project with a parent or grandparent or other relative, you will never regret it.

What is a "Life History Interview"? It is a series of audio- or videotaped personal interviews with an elderly member of a family, told to a (usually) younger member of the family, or told to a professional interviewer. To make the interview situations informal, comfortable, and familiar, the interviews are usually conducted at the narrator's own home. The purpose of this book is to enable you to carry out such interviews yourself, much more easily and in a more comprehensive way than if you just tried

2 INTRODUCTION

without preparation to turn on your recorder and ad-lib with your narrator for an hour or so.

Most of this book, as you can see by leafing through it, consists of suggested questions that will help your narrator talk personally about his or her life. The questions are organized in three broad categories:

- (1) *Typical life cycle and "life crisis" events*, such as memories of grandparents, memories of adolescence, courtship and marriage, births and development of children, work and career experiences, family life, middle age concerns, retirement, and aging.
- (2) *Historical events and your narrator's experience of them*, such as the world wars, the Great Depression, the Atomic Age, Vietnam, impression of presidents, and the rapid technological changes of the twentieth century.
- (3) *Personal values, experiences, and life philosophy*, such as religious experiences and attitudes, opinions on child rearing, attitudes about the modern world, musical and artistic values, and high and low points in your narrator's life and what he or she has learned from them.

In addition, a large number of special topics are developed in this book that you can present to your narrator to help bring out other personal characteristics and inner feelings. These special topics include observations about the "sexual revolution," how your narrator got through the hardest times in his or her life, feelings about the tremendous changes in modern technology, "closest brush with death," feelings about death and dying, strange or unusual life experiences, the most famous people ever known, and many other stimulating topics for discussion.

Why does the idea of a Life History Interview strike such a responsive chord in so many people? What do widespread feelings about the value of personal and family history say about the condition of our society and culture?

If you look beneath it, our interest in "roots" and in Life History Interviewing represents an intuitive response to a deeply felt need for a sense of personal and family continuity. We live in a hectic, rapidly changing, highly mobile world, where families have become physically and emotionally disconnected because of high geographical mobility, rapid technological change, generation gaps,

historical and present-day waves of immigration, residential segregation of the generations, and a cultural and commercial focus on youth.

As a result of all this, millions of people yearn to reconnect in some way with the continuity of their family's experience. This feeling of continuity was once taken for granted when three or four generations of a family lived close together, interacted, and passed on their traditions, values, stories, patterns of belief and feeling, and historical experiences to each successive generation. Now, much of it has been lost.

Conducting a Life History Interview gives you a chance to do something about this loss, both by intensifying the communication that does occur, and by preserving personal and family histories for future generations. The problem of intergenerational communication is very great in the modern world; it is difficult enough in stable, conservative societies, so it's no wonder that it's difficult in ours. This book is a tool to help all the generations of a family talk to one another. It also gives you an excuse to begin talking about some important things with older relatives, and perhaps to get to know them better.

Only thirty-five years ago, with the invention of audio- and videotape recorders, it became possible for an ordinary person, just by talking informally with another person, to pass on a unique legacy to enrich future generations. Perhaps one person in ten thousand will ever actually write an autobiography, but virtually everyone can talk one, in his or her own words, to a sympathetic and interested listener. This book is the means for you, that interested and sympathetic listener, to help your parents or grandparents tell their life stories.

EQUIPMENT

You can use either audiotape recorders or video cassette recorders to tape the interviews you are about to do. Audiotapes and audiotape recorders are more readily available, are more familiar, and are considerably less expensive than video equipment. They capture the sound of your narrator's voice and record his or her stories, and will last indefinitely. Videotape and videotape recorders capture more expression and more dimensions of your narrator's personality, and are more fun to use, but they are more expensive.

Audiotape Recorders

Because you are recording within the limited range of the human voice, you do not need any very expensive equipment. You don't want the cheapest recorder you can find, but on the other hand, you don't need anything close to the top-of-the-line model. A middle-price-range cassette tape recorder will do just fine. Try to get one with built-in "internal noise control," which is a special circuitry that diminishes clicks and whirrs on your tape made by the moving parts of the recorder itself. Check to be sure the tape recorder has a microphone, either built-in or as a separate unit.

Use 90-minute cassettes, and, when buying tapes, buy a fairly top-quality brand. (Not so much for super high fidelity, but so the tapes won't break or tangle up.) Always take at least two blank tapes with you—if the session goes well and your narrator isn't tired, you may want to extend the session beyond a couple of hours.

When you are conducting the interview, be sure to keep an eye on the tape as it approaches the end of a side. Some audio recorders don't have a signal to tell you when the tape has run out, and you can miss recording important information if you don't realize that the tape has run out and needs to be turned over.

Keep a pen handy during the interview, and as one tape is used up, immediately write on its label the date, place, person's name, the interview title, and maybe a few themes discussed on the tape. If you are right in the middle of an important thought when the tape ends, just pop a new tape in and go on; but always remember to write the date, place, and name of the narrator on the tape label before you leave at the end of the session. It's easy to mix up tapes and get them out of sequence.

Videotape Recorders

You should definitely record at least one of your sessions on videotape. You can rent the equipment easily (look in the Yellow Pages under Videotape Recorders—Rentals). It's very easy to do, and it's clearly the trend of the future—more and more people have the equipment in their homes, and within a few years it is likely that every TV set will have a little slot to insert video cassettes. You will want to have recorded at least one of your interview sessions with this visual dimension. With video, you record every-

thing you record with audio, but you get to see your narrator too. Perhaps the best way is to do a mix—a few sessions on audiotape and a few on videotape.

When you inquire about rental rates for video equipment, remember that the best deals are usually over the weekend. If you are planning an interview around a visit to or a visit from a narrator, ask about variations on different days of the week.

Video equipment has now advanced to the point where you can set up and use it. The sales and rental staff at the video store will show you how to hook up the camera and recorder to a television, and you can be recording within a few minutes. All video is in color, and are from two to four hours in length.

To videotape an oral history interview you will need a cassette recorder (VCR), a VCR camera, a tripod for the camera, and a television. The newer models combine the camera and recorder in one portable instrument. There are basically two formats or types of video cassette recorders and tapes in widespread use in the United States now—Betamax format and VHS format. They're both equally good, but you can't play Betamax tapes on VHS equipment, and vice versa. So take your choice. It's very simple and not very expensive to have a Betamax recorder transferred onto VHS or the other way around if you ever want to use the other format. Don't worry about it—your priority is to get something done *now*. Your priority should always be to do something before it's too late; worry about the finer details of technology later. This technology changes so rapidly that within ten or twenty years you will probably arrange to have what you record now transferred to the next generation of equipment.

Get a tripod for your camera. You can't aim the camera with your hands steady, and do the interviewing, too. Remember, you want one you want your narrator to relate to, not your equipment. You must maintain emotional contact and not become infatuated with your equipment. Set up your camera and tripod off to the side and sit facing your narrator. Focus it and turn it on, and more or less forget about it. You don't have to worry about running out of tapes over with videotapes—they are continuous. The interaction is between the human beings involved, not between the equipment and your narrator. Occasionally, you can reach in and zoom in for a close-up of your speaker, but video is nowhere near as important as asking thoughtful questions and listening carefully to your narrator's responses.

Check Your Equipment

Always check to see if your equipment is working properly before beginning an interview to avoid the miserable experience of discovering afterward that your machine did not record it. The best way to do this is simply to record a few minutes of small talk before the interview, and then play it back to make sure everything is working properly.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

If possible, interviews should be conducted in the home of the narrator. The reasons for this are simple: it is more relaxed and comfortable for your speaker, it reinforces the idea that your narrator is the central focus of the project, it is likely that familiar surroundings will help the free flow of memories, and it eliminates any inconvenience in traveling for your narrator. It also reinforces the attitude of respect you want to develop for the stories you are about to hear and record. You have been invited to hear your narrator's life story, just as you've been invited as a guest into his or her home.

If you aren't able to conduct the interviews in your speaker's home, let him or her select the location. Ask your narrator to pick a time and place that's convenient and comfortable. You want a relaxed setting where your narrator feels in control and is the emotional center of attention.

Set up the equipment to one side so that you can maintain eye contact and so that the equipment is not a barrier between you. You don't have to sit directly across from your narrator. Just choose an easygoing situation, one that feels natural to the two of you. If you're using audiotape, set up the recorder on a table or on the floor in front of you so you can monitor the tape from time to time. With video, set up the equipment off to one side so it doesn't interfere with the emotional contact between the two of you.

Avoiding "Mike Fright"

Many people suffer from "mike fright," or anxiety over being recorded. A simple way to relax a speaker who freezes at the idea of having to "say something" or to "perform" is to use the "immediate playback technique."

The first thing to do, as soon as you enter your narrator's house, is to look for an electrical outlet. Say something like, "I just want to make sure this is working properly." Then plug the tape recorder into the outlet and turn it on. Then, finish setting up for the interview while the recorder is running. Make small talk about the weather or the house or anything at all while you arrange chairs and so on. After you have chosen where to sit and opened up the book, say something like, "I'm just going to play this back and see if it's working . . ." ²rewind the tape, and play back what has just been recorded during the previous couple of minutes.

For many older people, this is interesting in and of itself. It may be the first time they have ever heard their own voice on a recorder, and if you are using videotape, it will certainly be the first time they have seen themselves on television. People are usually delighted and surprised to hear or see themselves, and the ice has been broken before they even have a chance to get nervous. You can now begin the interview, having finessed your narrator's tape recorder anxiety by matter-of-factly playing back the first few minutes of your interview situation.

The technique of immediate playback works especially well with videotape recording. When you arrive at your narrator's house, immediately find the TV, hook up your camera and recorder, focus it, and turn it on. Your narrator's face will appear on the TV as the recorder starts working. To most people who grew up before World War II, the first time they see themselves on TV is a delightful and surprising experience. Even for those of us who grew up with TV, it's still a thrill to see ourselves on camera; but to older people, it is astonishing. The first few minutes of your first tape are usually exclamations of: "Is that me?!" "Oh, my goodness, is that me on television?!?" and so on. This is great stuff—keep it, do not erase it. Once you are sure everything is working properly, start your interview. You'll see, videotaped interviews are more fun than audiotaped ones. That's not to say that the audiotaped ones are not valuable; again, it's the emotions and the interaction between you and your narrator that are most important. But do try to make the effort to record at least one of your sessions on videotape.

Trust Your Instincts

Always remember this rule: Trust yourself as an interviewer. You have already gone so far as to buy this book, and you have

made all the arrangements to begin interviewing. Therefore, you must have strong feelings about what you are doing and why you want to do it. Trust those feelings and they will provide you with the most important direction for your interviews. You are the key to engaging and maintaining contact with the person you are interviewing. Don't get too involved in interviewing techniques—the best technique is to be interested in what your narrator has to say.

Listen and Wait

Always remember that you are interviewing your narrator, so try not to have a conversation with him or her. Your job is to listen carefully and sensitively, and to be curious about what your narrator wants to say. Try to say as little as possible yourself; in fact, practice waiting instead of interrupting when you start to feel slightly uneasy or uncomfortable because of a pause in your narrator's conversation. A five- or ten-second silence is perfectly acceptable. Count silently to ten, and wait for your narrator to break the silence with another thought. Learning to wait silently long beyond what would be tolerable in a normal conversation is a rewarding skill, for it allows your speaker to talk in more detail and depth about his or her feelings and experiences.

Often you can repeat back the last few words or last sentence of what your narrator has just said in order to continue along in the same vein. For example, suppose in response to a question about "the hardest time in your life and how you got through it," your narrator has been talking about his or her spouse's death. He or she might say something like:

"I don't know how I did get through that year. It was my friends—good friends—and the kids. They kept me going. . . ." Then, a long silence. You could wait for five to ten seconds, and then perhaps you could say:

"Your friends, and the kids, kept you going?"

Your narrator will pick it up and talk further about what it meant to come back from ultimate grief with the help of friends and family.

Be Easy on Yourself

Try not to demand too much of yourself as an interviewer. These interviews are supposed to be enjoyable and fun. Absolutely any-

thing you record will be of intense emotional value to you and your narrator and to the rest of the family. Just try it—turn on your recorder, ask a question, and listen. You can't do a bad interview.

The greatest act of creativity and courage is to overcome your own resistance to starting these interviews with your loved older relative. Part of this resistance has to do with our understandable wish to deny that our parents or grandparents will not always be with us. It's more comforting to think that there will always be a chance to do a Life History Interview "some other time." We want to deny our narrator's and our own mortality. Don't let your fears and wishes about death interfere with your clear intuition that you can help a relative or friend create a unique emotional legacy for you and for the younger people of his or her world.

STARTING THE INTERVIEWS

Remember the immediate playback technique to get the machine introduced and to break the ice before your speaker has a chance to get nervous, especially when you meet for your first session.

Then, once the equipment is working properly and you and your speaker are comfortable, tell your narrator you are turning on the tape recorder, and turn it on. Always begin an interview by establishing the time and place, and the person you are talking to. (See "Family History," p. 15.) You may say something like, "This is November 9, 1983, and I'm in Fairfax, Virginia, USA, talking with Mr. John K. Jones." Then move right into the first few questions of the first interview: "How old are you now?" "Where and when were you born?" "Where was your mother born?" "Where was your father born?" and so on. Before a minute has passed, you have begun to record, you have set your narrator's mind at ease (these questions are easy to answer and are more or less what someone expects an interview to be like), and you have begun to have your speaker talk to you and not to your machine. Relax, listen, and keep going with the questions and topics you have selected that interest you.

After the first interview, when you begin a new taping session, it is often a good idea to review briefly the last session by asking your narrator if he or she has remembered anything else about the topics and people discussed. Use your sense of the situation when asking this—if you feel that it might interrupt a trend of mood or

10 INTRODUCTION

thought in the direction of the interview you are planning, don't ask it. But, as an introduction to a new session, you can usually ask, "Since we last talked, has anything else come to mind that we didn't mention in the last session?" If your narrator doesn't have anything to add, go on to the questions and topics of the day.

Taking a Break

About an hour and a half into an interview, you and your narrator will probably want to stop and take a break if you plan to have a two- or three-hour session. Stand up, stretch, and have a cup of coffee or a glass of water. It can sometimes be a good idea to leave the tape recorder running during a break. Often very important spontaneous personal comments will come through after the directed questions have been asked and you are just relaxing. This is especially true in the first interview when the tape recorder is still something unusual and artificial in the interviewing situation.

Be aware of boredom or fatigue on the part of your respondent and yourself. If you are both eager to go on with the interview, then proceed. If not, it is a good idea to schedule the next session for a few days ahead, and let your narrator turn over in his or her mind what has already been discussed.

After the Interview

If you decide to stop and begin a new session later, briefly go over the general topics of the next session so that your narrator can begin to think about them in the meantime. You could say something like:

"Next time we'll be talking more about the family: your parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, and any other important people in the family. Also, we might have time to talk about your childhood and what it was like for you. [Or whatever topics you are planning to discuss in the next session.] Maybe you could think about these memories a bit until we get together again, and I'll see you [day and time] and we can talk some more."

Label the Tapes and Give Them Directly to Your Narrator

Once an interview is completed, take the tape out of the recorder, write the name, date, place, and interview title on the label, and give it directly to your narrator. Ask him or her to keep the tapes in a safe place until you finish the interviews. Explain that the point of giving over the tapes is so that no one will hear them until your narrator feels comfortable about duplicating and distributing them to other members of the family.

Labeling and giving the tapes directly to your narrator is very important. It helps build trust, and emphasizes by direct action the confidentiality that exists between the two of you. You want to stress that the tapes are for your narrator first, and that you want him or her to feel completely sure that feelings for privacy come first where the duplication and distribution of a person's life story are concerned. Narrators should be able to do whatever they choose with the tapes, including erasing portions about which they do not feel comfortable, or keeping the tapes for release only after their death. A request for editing out a portion of a tape that your narrator might not feel comfortable with does not happen very often, but your narrator must feel that he or she has the right.

The payoff for giving the narrator control of the tapes may come several sessions later, when your narrator trusts you enough to reveal some deep and truthful feeling, knowing it will not be treated lightly or played back without permission.

Several weeks after you have completed the interviews, ask your narrator how he or she feels about the information on the tapes. If he or she is comfortable with them, you should make at least one duplicate copy for safekeeping, and several copies for other members of the family. Look in the Yellow Pages for a recording studio that can make copies of your tapes.

If you are interested at some point in transcribing the tapes to produce a written document from the interviews, look in the Yellow Pages under Secretarial Services. Don't worry about transcribing the tapes now; once you have completed the interviews, they can be transcribed at any time. Transcribing can be fairly expensive, and you will probably want to edit the first draft. A standard guide to transcribing and editing oral history tapes is *Oral History*.

from *Tape to Type* by Davis, Back, and Maclean (see Further Reading, page 307).

Don't Edit the Original Tapes

Don't edit the original tapes. If you must condense some of the narrative, make a copy first, then do your editing. How can you tell now what may be of value to a listener or viewer in thirty or fifty years? The footage you decide to discard now may include material important to future generations. You should always arrange to make copies of the tapes anyway (after receiving permission from your narrator), so experiment with editing on one of these copies. Look in the Yellow Pages under Recording Service—Sound and Video to find a company that will duplicate your tapes.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS

The best way to use this book is to treat it like a workbook. Skim through each chapter before your sessions, with a pencil in your hand, and mark those questions which are interesting to you. Ask yourself: Which questions do I sincerely want to hear my speaker talk about? Your feelings will provide a genuine emotional quality to the interviews, and the sessions won't be boring to you, your speaker, or a future listener.

No one conducting a Life History Interview should attempt to ask every single question included here. Instead, use the book as a general structure for your interviews, and select informally from the large number of specific topics and questions provided. It doesn't tell you exactly what to do at each and every point in your interviews. Rather, use it in conjunction with your own good judgment, and trust your feelings about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Always remember that there is no such thing as a "bad" interview. Anything you record now will be priceless to you and your family in ten or twenty years from now. If you ask only one in ten of the questions suggested in this book, that's more than enough to guarantee a powerful emotional legacy, more personally valu-

able to you and your family than a trunkload of photographs or letters, or even a written autobiography.

The Order of Conduct of the Interviews

This book contains twelve chapters, each addressing a general subject area that lends itself to many questions and lines of exploration. The "Family History" chapter is a good place to start, partly because the questions and topics are not deeply personal or threatening in any way. People find it easy to describe and talk about their grandparents and parents. The more personal, introspective, or sensitive topics usually begin to emerge in later interviews, when the initial novelty of being recorded wears off and after rapport has been built between you and your narrator. Some of the "Childhood" topics will overlap those in the "Family History" session, and other sessions' topics may come up spontaneously at times where they do not appear in the book. Remember that no session will ever be completely self-contained and predictable, so trust your intuition when following the flow of your narrator's reminiscences.

The "Childhood" and "Youth" sessions can follow "Family History" easily. These sessions will sometimes overlap to some extent topics previously discussed, but they provide a general chronological orientation for your first meetings. In the "Childhood" sessions and significantly more in the "Youth" sessions, you will want to start asking questions from the "Historical Events" chapter. (See the introduction to the "Youth" chapter for a discussion of this point.) Historical events always strongly influence the outlook of the generations that experience them. To understand your narrator's life and values, it helps to know the historical context of his or her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

The "General Questions, Unusual Life Experiences, and Personal Philosophy and Values" chapter works best after you have created a comfortable rapport with your narrator. Many people begin to ask questions from this chapter after the second or third session, although some people find it interesting to ask some questions from this chapter during their first recording session. It is a good idea to show your narrator the book, and let him or her leaf through it. Often, some of the topic headings will stimulate memory and get your narrator to make spontaneous comments about

some of the different topics. Leafing through the "Personal Philosophy and Values" chapter will also help to get your speaker oriented in a more introspective way, and later, when some of these topics begin to come up in your interviews, they are not a surprise since your narrator knows what to expect.

Questions about middle age, aging, and old age, and the session where you ask your narrator to talk about his or her children and grandchildren, are easily integrated and balanced by questions from the "Historical Events" chapter and the "Unusual Life Experiences" chapter. The later sessions will find you moving back and forth between life cycle topics (such as questions about children, grandchildren, and aging) and historical and philosophical questions. Just as the path of a person's life becomes more complex and complicated as he or she grows older, so too an autobiographical interview becomes more complex and must rely more and more on your ability to try to develop certain ideas or themes as they have evolved in your narrator's life story.

The truth of the matter is that beyond the first two or three sessions, a Life History Interview always becomes more free-wheeling. So trust your own curiosity, relax, turn on your recording equipment, and enjoy yourself.

Family History



Family History is almost always the best session to start with when you begin a Life History Interview. It is the session where your narrator is asked to talk about what he or she knows about the family, its members, and its traditions, so that younger family members will know something about the kind of people their ancestors were.

The Family History interview has two broad purposes. One is to elicit from your speaker as much information as he or she can remember about where the members of the family came from and lived, what they did, and what some of their personal characteristics were. The other purpose is to help build rapport and communication between you and the person being interviewed, so that later, in sessions where more introspective and personal topics are introduced, there will be enough trust and sensitivity built up between the two of you that some real and honest communication can take place.

In part, the directness and systematic approach of the questions in this session make the topics easy to talk about, and usually the questions about parents and grandparents evoke warm memories that help to create an easy feeling about the first session. People beginning the interviews are often not sure what a Life History Interview is, even though you will have talked about it before you take out your recording equipment.

Always start out in the same way—turn on the recorder and

establish the time, place, and the person you are talking to. Say something like: "This is Saturday, November 14, 1982, and I'm talking to Mrs. Alice Miller in Baltimore, Maryland, USA." It is important to make this introduction routine because people listening to or viewing your tapes twenty or thirty or more years from now will want to know where you were or when the interview was conducted. These tapes may be around for a very long time, and what seems obvious to you now may not be obvious at all in the not too distant future.

Start out by asking the first four or five questions in a very matter-of-fact way, pretty much as they appear in the text. "How old are you now?" "Where were you born?" "When were you born?" et cetera. Then go on to the questions about where your speaker's parents and grandparents were born. This immediately gets you started, and it conforms to most people's ideas about what an interview is supposed to be like. These questions seem almost like the ones the census taker would ask. They are non-threatening and don't demand any kind of "performance" from your narrator. Before you know it, your speaker is telling you all sorts of interesting things about the family members and his or her memories of the family's history.

There are some things to remember when doing the Family History interview, and some of these points apply to other interviews as well. First, you should always prepare a bit by skimming through the chapter and marking the questions you are most interested in asking your narrator. You can't ask every single question—it would take far too long. But many of them will make you curious: What did your great-grandfather do for a living? What did he look like? Was he scholarly and introspective, or an outgoing man of action? Was he physically strong? Does anybody in the present generations of the family resemble him in looks or personality? Let your own curiosity and genuine interest be your guide. These questions, and your interest in them, will help to stimulate your narrator's recollections.

Before the interview, you might want to jot down a few notes about stories that you have already heard from your narrator. Most of us have heard many stories from our grandparents and parents. They are favorite stories, and can be about anything at all: how an ancestor escaped from the police; Civil War experiences passed down in the family's folklore; colorful personality stories, such as the time grandfather got drunk and started a fight at the volunteer firemen's picnic. Get these "already known" stories down on tape in your narrator's own words.

Finally, you will find that one interview about the past may stimulate your narrator to do a lot of thinking and may raise a lot more questions in your narrator's mind. After the interview is over, he or she may research the questions that he or she couldn't answer. You may then want to schedule another session or part of a session to follow up on some of these family history topics, make additions, and clarify recollections. You might even have a brother or sister or friend of your narrator sit in to help add impressions and information. As another way of dealing with this "stimulation of memory effect," I often start each successive session with the question: "Did anything else come to mind since we last talked, or did we leave anything out last time?" This provides the opportunity to address something important that might have been remembered in the meantime.

But for now, turn on your recorder, check to see that it is working, announce the time, place, and person being interviewed, and start out.

Family History

AGE, BIRTHDATE, AND BIRTHPLACE

How old are you now?
When were you born?
Where were you born?

WHERE PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS WERE BORN

Where was your mother born?
Do you know what her maiden name was?
Do you know where your mother's mother (your grandmother on your mother's side) was born?
How about your mother's father? Where was your grandfather (on your mother's side) born?

So, then, your mother's side of the family came from what country(s)? Or, from what part of this country?

Where was your father born?
Do you know where your father's mother (your grandmother on your father's side) was born?

What about your father's father (your grandfather on your father's side)? Do you know where he was born or where he came from?

So, your father's ancestors came from where? What country, or what part of this country?

STORIES ABOUT WHY THE FAMILY EMIGRATED TO AMERICA

Do you remember hearing any stories about why your ancestors—either on your father's or mother's side of the family—came to America? [For most black Americans, the answer here will be "slavery."]

Let's take your father's side of the family. Do you know what caused them to pick up and emigrate from the "old country"?

How about your mother's ancestors? Do you remember ever hearing any stories about what led them to leave the "old country" and come to America?

WHERE THE DIFFERENT BRANCHES OF THE FAMILY SETTLED DOWN IN AMERICA

After your ancestors arrived in this country, where did they settle down?

Does either branch of the family have a regional character? Are they more Southern, or Western, or Eastern, or Midwestern?

Would you say they were more city, or more rural people?

Grandparents

Let's take some time to talk about your grandparents. Can you tell me anything about them? What do you remember or know about them, on either side of the family? [wait, allow narrator to answer]

MOTHER'S PARENTS

Let's start with your grandparents on your mother's side. Can you tell me something about them?

Do you remember hearing any stories about how your grandparents met each other? How they first got together and subsequently married?

GRANDMOTHER (MOTHER'S SIDE)

Can you tell me something about your grandmother on your mother's side? [wait] Do you remember anything else about her? [If narrator can't remember, follow up with]:

What kind of person was she? What was her personality like?

What did she look like?

How many children did she have? (How many aunts and uncles do you have on your mother's side?)

What were some of her positive qualities? Perhaps there are some special skills or abilities that you remember?

How about some of her more negative qualities?

What social class would you say she was from?

How important was she to you? Do you think she had much of an effect on you?

Did she pass anything on in the family's traditions—either in material possessions or in some characteristic way of looking at life or doing things?

Do you know what she died of?

And, do you know where she was buried?

GRANDFATHER (MOTHER'S SIDE)

What can you tell me about your grandfather on your mother's side of the family? [wait for response]

What kind of work did he do?

What kind of a person was he? How would you describe his personality?

Can you remember any specific incidents or memories associated with him? For example, good times you had with him, or any other specific memories about you and him? Does anything come to mind?

What did he look like?

Can you think of something about him that was especially distinctive or characteristic? Something that really stood out about him?

What was he like emotionally? Quiet or loud? Happy or more melancholy? Was he funny? Was he a stern man, or more easy-going?

Do you think he passed on in the traditions of the family any

special personality characteristic or way of doing things or way of looking at life?

Do you think you have any of his qualities in you?

Do you know how he died, and where he was buried?

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS FROM MOTHER'S PARENTS

Are there any family heirlooms or property that came down from your grandparents on your mother's side of the family?

Where are they now? Who in the family has them?

FATHER'S PARENTS

Now, tell me something about your father's parents—your grandparents on your father's side. [wait]

Do you remember hearing any stories about how they met each other and came to be married?

GRANDMOTHER (FATHER'S SIDE)

Tell me something that you remember about your grandmother on your father's side of the family. [wait]

Can you remember anything else about her?

What kind of a person was she? How would you describe her personality?

What did she look like? Describe her for me.

Do any memories come to mind of things you did with her?

Any specific memories or places you went, or of things you did together?

Did she work outside the home? Or was she mainly a housewife and a mother?

What social class would you say she was from?

How important was she to you? Do you think she had much of an effect on you?

In what ways? Do you think you have any of her traits in you?

Tell me a story about her that would characterize her—something that she did, or her response to something that happened to her.

Was there anything about her that was unusual or especially distinctive?

What was she like emotionally?

Do you think she passed on in the traditions of the family any special personality characteristics or special ways of looking at things?

Do you know how she died, and where she was buried?

GRANDFATHER (FATHER'S SIDE)

And finally, tell me something about your father's father, your grandfather on your father's side of the family. [wait]

Can you remember anything else about him?

What kind of work did he do?

Was he successful, or prosperous in his work?

What kind of person was he? Can you describe some of his personality characteristics?

What did he look like?

Do you think you have any of his characteristics in you?

Did he pass on in the traditions of the family any special personality traits or ways of looking at life that you are aware of?

I am thinking, for example, of maybe a stubbornness, or maybe an optimistic, cheerful outlook, or something characteristic like that.

Do any incidents or memories about him stand out especially in your mind?

Tell me about what you are remembering right now.

How important was your grandfather to you? Do you think he had much of an effect on you?

Do you know how he died, and where he was buried?

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS FROM FATHER'S PARENTS

Were there any family heirlooms or property or traditions that came down from your grandparents on your father's side of the family?

Where are they now? Who in the family has them?

ANY OTHER STORIES ABOUT ANCESTORS

Can you think of anything else about your ancestors? Any stories that were told about the [mother's family name] family, or about the [father's family name] family that we haven't mentioned?

Do you know of any "black sheep," notorious characters, or "horse thieves" on either side of the family?

How about stories about "ladies' men" or "womanizers," or stories about beautiful women in your family's history?

Any stories about royalty in the family's history?

Any stories about famous or infamous relatives on either side of the family, for example, a "distant cousin" who might have done something especially important? [wait]

Was there anyone you ever heard of in the family with any unusual psychic abilities or special powers? Such as a gift for healing, or perhaps some power of ESP, or "fortune telling" or "second sight"?

Who was that, and what was he or she said to be able to do?

Do you think any of these abilities have been passed on in the family?

Parents

Now let's talk about your parents. Take some time now, and tell me something about them. [wait, allow your narrator to finish his or her initial comments about parents before asking additional questions]

HOW PARENTS MET AND FELL IN LOVE

Do you remember the story of how they first met and fell in love?

Tell me that story. Did they ever tell it to you?

Did they ever talk much about the circumstances around which they came to get married?

What did they talk about? What was their courtship like?

MOTHER

Let's spend the next several minutes talking about your mother. Do you know where and when she was born?

MOTHER'S CHILDHOOD

Where did she grow up?

What was her childhood like? Did she ever tell you much about it?

MOTHER'S LIFE BEFORE SHE MARRIED

What did she do before she married your father? Did she ever talk about this part of her life?

Do you know if she worked before she married?

Was she previously married before she married your father?

COURTSHIP

What was your parents' courtship like? Did your mother ever talk about it?

What did she say about her courtship with your father? Can you remember any stories she told about herself or about him at that time in her life?

Do you know how long they knew each other, or went out with each other, or were engaged, before they got married?

MOTHER'S CHILDREN (YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS)

How many children did your mother have?

Can you briefly name her children (your brothers and sisters), and which was the eldest, the next, and so on?

DESCRIPTION OF YOUR MOTHER

What did your mother look like? Can you describe her?

When you remember her, how do you remember her looking? How old is she, what does she look like, in the picture of her that you have in your memory?

Do you have any actual photographs of her? Or does anybody in the family?

Did your mother have any scars or birthmarks that you remember?

[If birthmarks]: Are there any birthmarks similar to hers that

you know of anywhere else in the family? Like among any of her children or grandchildren?

[If scars]: How did she get the scar? Did she ever tell you about it?

A STORY TO CHARACTERIZE YOUR MOTHER

Tell me something about your mother that would characterize her. A story about her or an anecdote that reveals something about the kind of a woman she was. [wait]

What special story about something she did or about the way she was stands out in your mind?

What thoughts are you thinking right now? What are you thinking about her right at this moment?

SOCIAL CLASS, EDUCATION

What social class would you say your mother grew up in?

How much education did she have?

MOTHER: WORK, HOMEMAKER

Did she work outside the home, or was she mainly a homemaker? [If mother worked outside the home]:

What kind of work did she do?

Was it unusual for a woman and mother at that time to work for a wage outside the home?

Why do you think that was?

Do you think you learned something about what women were capable of doing in the world of work from your mother's career that helped you in your life?

Why do you say that?

[If mother was primarily a homemaker]:

What kinds of things did your mother do around the home?

Was she a good cook?

What dish that she made was your favorite?

How did it taste?

Can you make that dish?

Take a minute now and describe the recipe for me. How do you go about making it?

MOTHER'S TALENTS AND INTERESTS

Was she good at crafts of any kind? Like making toys or clothes, for example?

Was she artistic? Or musical?

Did your mother have any hobbies?

What were they?

BEDTIME STORIES

Did she tell you bedtime stories when you were little?

Do you still remember any of them?

Could you tell me one of them now? Or part of one? Who were the characters in her stories, and what would they do?

Did you ever tell any of these bedtime stories to your kids?

MOTHER'S CIVIC INVOLVEMENTS

How about her civic responsibilities? Was she active in the community, or in the schools?

In what ways? What did she do?

SKILLS LEARNED AND TALENTS INHERITED FROM MOTHER

What skills do you think you learned from her?

Which of her talents do you think you inherited?

MOTHER'S PERSONALITY, EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

What were some of her emotional qualities? Can you describe her personality a little more? [wait]

Was she a loving and warm person? Or did her personality have a strict and severe side to it? Or both?

Did she ever lose her temper that you remember?

Can you remember one time when she got really mad at you?

What had you done?

How did it all end up?

Did she have a good sense of humor?

BEST AND WORST THINGS ABOUT HER

What were some of her best personal qualities?

And what about the bad things about her? Can you think of any of her negative qualities?

EMOTIONAL QUALITIES YOU INHERITED FROM HER

Which of her emotional qualities do you think you inherited from her?

In what ways do you think you are very much like your mother, and in what ways do you think you are the most different?

MOTHER'S CHILD-REARING ATTITUDES

How would you characterize her attitude toward raising her children?

Was she strict or more easygoing?

What do you think were some of the main values she tried to teach her children?

MOTHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SEX AND SEXUALITY

What was your mother's attitude toward sex and sexuality, in your opinion?

Would you say she was more of a "prude" about sex, or was she more open, natural, and communicative about it?

Did she communicate those attitudes to you, do you think?

Did she ever give you and your brothers and sisters any "sex education," or talk about sex or marriage when you were growing up?

How were young men and women expected to behave when you were growing up? What would have been your mother's attitude toward premarital sex or teenage sexuality?

Why do you think she felt that way?

ANYTHING UNUSUAL ABOUT YOUR MOTHER

Was there anything really unusual about your mother? [wait]

Why do you say that?

DISAPPOINTMENTS/TRAGEDIES IN YOUR MOTHER'S LIFE

What disappointments do you think she suffered in her life?

Was there any great sadness, or tragedy, or regret that she had suffered in her life that you know of?

How did she cope with, or come to terms with, sadnesses and disappointments?

Was she the type to dwell on her misfortunes, or was she more the type who picks up and goes on in spite of hardships?

MOTHER'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Do you know if she had a strong religious faith or feeling?

Did she believe in God?

Did she pray?

What religion was she raised in, and what religion did she practice?

MOTHER'S HEALTH

How was your mother's health generally?

Did she have any severe illnesses or injuries while you were growing up?

How do you think that affected you and the rest of the family?

MOTHER'S DEATH

How and when did she die?

Tell me about her death. [wait]

Where is the cemetery where she is buried?

How hard was it for you to accept and get over your mother's death?

Before she died, did you ever talk to her about her attitude toward death and dying?

What was her attitude?

Do you think she believed in any kind of afterlife?

Do you think you share your mother's attitude toward death and mortality?

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU LEARNED FROM YOUR MOTHER

What do you think was the most important thing you learned from your mother?

HEIRLOOMS FROM MOTHER

Did she leave any personal belongings or heirlooms that you still have, or that another member of the family has?

ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR MOTHER I DIDN'T ASK?

Is there anything else important that I forgot to ask about her? Anything that we left out about her? [wait]

FATHER

Now let's go on and talk in the same way about your father. Tell me something about him. [wait for initial comments]

Where did he come from? Where did he grow up?

Do you know where and when he was born?

FATHER'S CHILDHOOD

What was his childhood like? Do you remember his telling you anything about his early years?

Did he talk much about his parents, or his boyhood, or about what his life was like when he was growing up?

What do you remember?

WHAT FATHER LOOKED LIKE

What did he look like?

When you remember him, how do you remember him looking? How old is he, and what does he look like, in the picture of him that you have in your memory?

Do you have any actual photographs of him? Or does anybody in the family have one?

FATHER'S WORK

What was your father's occupation? What did he do for a living? What kinds of work did he do as a young man? Did he ever tell you about some of his first jobs?

What other kinds of work did your father do when you were growing up?

SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION

What social class would you say he grew up in?

How much education did he have?

FATHER'S LIFE BEFORE HE MARRIED

What did he do before he married your mother? Did he talk much about that part of his life?

Was he previously married?

Did he ever tell you about any of his adventures or about his life as a bachelor?

How and where did he live, and what did he do before he married your mother?

FATHER'S COURTSHIP OF YOUR MOTHER

What was his courtship of your mother like? Did he tell any stories about when they were going out together that you remember?

How did he meet and fall in love with your mother?

Any funny stories that you remember him telling about his courtship of your mother?

A STORY TO CHARACTERIZE YOUR FATHER

How would you characterize your father? Can you think of a story about him that illustrates something about the kind of man he was? [wait]

What special story stands out in your mind about him? Something you did with him, or something you know about him that he did?

What thoughts are going through your head right now? What are you thinking or remembering?

SOMETHING UNUSUAL ABOUT YOUR FATHER

Was there anything really unusual about your father? [wait]

Why do you say that?

FATHER'S SKILLS AND TALENTS

What were some of your father's skills and talents? [wait]

Was he a good handyman? Outdoorsman? Hunter or fisherman? Musician? Artist? Storyteller or joke teller?

Was he an athlete?

Was he physically a strong man?

Did your father have any hobbies?

What were they?

FATHER'S RELATIONS WITH PEOPLE

Would you say your father was "good with people"?

Was he more of a loner, or did he have a lot of friends and like to be around a lot of people?

SKILLS OR TALENTS YOU INHERITED FROM YOUR FATHER

Which of his skills or talents do you think you inherited?

Why do you say that?

FATHER'S CIVIC INVOLVEMENTS

What about his civic involvements? Was he active in the schools, or in the community, or in politics?

In what way?

FATHER'S PERSONALITY AND EMOTIONAL QUALITIES

What was he like emotionally? Can you describe his personality a little more?

Was he full of fun, or was he gloomy?

Was he strict, or was he more easygoing?

Did he have a good sense of humor?

Did he ever lose his temper?

Tell me about one of the times you remember him losing his temper and getting really mad.

What happened?

Was he much of a drinker? Or much of a cusser?

DISAPPOINTMENTS IN FATHER'S LIFE

What disappointments do you think he suffered in his life? [wait]

How did he tend to deal with troubles and adversity?

Did he tend to express himself emotionally, or did he tend to keep things in or keep things to himself?

Was he the type to dwell on his problems and misfortunes, or was he more the type who picked up and went on in spite of hardships?

Are you like him in this respect? Or are you different?

DID YOUR FATHER EVER CRY?

Did you ever see your father cry?

[If yes]: When was that? What happened?

[If no]: Why do you think you never saw him cry?

FATHER'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Was your father a religious man?

Why do you say that?

Did he pray?

Was he active in a church? What did he do to express his religion?

What religion was he raised in, and what religion did he practice?

FATHER'S SEXUAL ATTITUDES

What was your father's attitude toward sex and sexuality, as you remember him?

Would you say he was more communicative and open, or more closed and repressed about sexuality and sex?

Did you inherit the same attitudes from him, or are you different from him in this area?

Do you remember him ever giving you or your brothers and sisters

any sex education or talk to you about sex or marriage when you were growing up?

What would your father's attitude have been toward teenage or premarital sex?

BEST AND WORST THINGS ABOUT FATHER

What were some of your father's best personal qualities, as you remember him?

What about bad things about him? What were some of his more negative qualities?

BEDTIME STORIES TOLD BY FATHER

Do you remember any of the bedtime stories that he used to tell you when you were little?

What were they about? Who were some of the characters? Do you remember?

Did you ever tell any of these bedtime stories to your kids?

FATHER'S HEALTH

How was your father's health in general?

Did he have any severe illnesses or injuries while you were growing up?

How do you think that affected you and the rest of the family?

FATHER'S DEATH

How and when did your father die?

Tell me about his death. [wait]

Where is he buried?

How hard was it for you to accept and get over your father's death?

Before he died, did you ever talk with him about his attitude toward death and dying?

What was his attitude?

Do you think he believed in any kind of an afterlife?

Do you think you have the same attitude that your father had toward death and mortality?

MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU LEARNED FROM YOUR FATHER

What do you think was the most important thing you learned from your father?

HEIRLOOMS FROM FATHER

Did he leave any personal belongings or heirlooms that you still have, or that another member of the family has?

ANYTHING I LEFT OUT ABOUT YOUR FATHER

Is there anything else that I forgot to ask about him? Anything that we left out about the kind of a man he was? [wait]

Other Family Members

UNCLES AND AUNTS

Let's go on now with any other members of the family. Were there any favorite uncles or aunts who were important to you when you were growing up?

Tell me their names, and something about them.

What did they do?

In what ways were they important to you, or in what ways did they influence you?

Were your parents' families close? Were your mother and father close to their brothers and sisters?

COUSINS

Were there any cousins that you remember who were important to you, or who are important to you now?

Tell me something about them.

In what ways were they important to you when you were growing up?

Did you see them often?

Did you have a favorite cousin?

Who was he/she, and what was he/she like?

What are some of the things that you remember doing together? Do you have any funny stories about things you did? How did your cousins do in later life? Are you in touch with any of them, or with their children?

How could somebody in the family trace them or their children and contact them now? Do you know where your cousins and their families are now?

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

How about your brothers and sisters? [wait]

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

What were, or are, their names, and what was their position in the family (oldest, next to oldest, and so on)?

Did you help to take care of any of your brothers and sisters when they were small, or they you?

How did you feel about that, and how do you think it might have affected you or them in later life?

Do you remember any funny stories about things that happened when one or the other of you was supposed to be taking care of the other one(s)?

Can you take some time now and tell me something about each of your brothers and sisters? [wait, let your narrator frame his or her own answers. Then, if appropriate, go on to ask about each, filling in their names on each question]:

What was ____ like when you were all growing up together?

Tell me a funny story if you can think of one, about something ____ did?

What did ____ look like? Can you describe him/her?

What special skills, abilities, or talents did ____ have?

What was ____'s personality like? How would you describe him/her emotionally?

What did ____ go on to do in later life?

Is ____ still living?

[If not living]: When and how did he/she die?

Did he/she have any children, that is, your nephews and nieces?

What are their names, and where are they? Are you in touch with any of them?

[Repeat above questions for each brother and sister, if appropriate.]

Which brother or sister were you the closest to?

Why do you think ____ was your favorite?

What was it about him/her that you especially liked?

Do you think you were alike in many ways, or was it your difference that attracted you?

Is there a special memory about you and ____ that stands out in your mind now after all these years?

Are you still in touch with your brothers and sisters?

OTHERS IN AND AROUND THE FAMILY

Was there anybody else associated with your family who was important to you when you were growing up? A nursemaid, for example, or a special family friend who had an influence on you? Tell me about them if you can remember.

What was the influence that they had on you and your family, in your opinion?

SUMMARIZE THE BRANCHES OF THE FAMILY

Can you briefly summarize what you know about the branches of the family, in case in the future someone wants to look up his or her distant relatives? Their names, where they live, or what they do for a living?

Do you know of any family still in the "old country" that a person could get back in touch with?

END OF INTERVIEW, SCHEDULE OF NEXT SESSION

Okay, thank you for talking with me. Next time we'll be talking about your childhood and your memories of your first school experiences. Let's set a time and date to get together and talk again.

Do these tapes serve the purpose? Have you talked about most of the things that you would have written about in your autobiography?

Can you think of anything we've left out?

If there's something you'd like to talk about on this tape privately, I can show you how to operate the equipment, and I'll leave the room. That way, you can say something completely private, and you can keep the tape to be played only when you specify it can be played. [You can show your narrator how to turn the tape recorder on and off. This tape can then be restricted from duplication until a future time of your narrator's choosing. This is an opportunity for a completely private statement by your narrator about anything he or she might choose.]

Narrator as Parent



This section develops questions to help your narrator recall his or her experiences as a parent, and to describe the character and development of his or her children as they grew up. The wording of some of the questions will have to be changed slightly if you are interviewing one of your own parents or grandparents. For example, if the question or topic as it is written refers to the narrator's wife, you of course would change it to "Mom" or "Grandma"; or if the question refers to the other children of your narrator, you would be able to ask it personally about your brothers and sisters instead of asking about "your second child" or "your third child." Just take the basic idea or theme of the question or topic, and ask it so that it applies to you.

The idea of this chapter is to get an impression from your narrator of his or her children at different times in their lives: as children, adolescents, young married adults, and as they are at the present time. The subsections developed here are: questions to be asked of mothers; questions addressed to fathers; questions about children growing up and as teenagers; questions about children's marriages; and observations on children as they are now.

Trust your curiosity and instincts as you have done in the previous interviews. This is not the easiest interview to do with one's own parents. Select the ideas that interest you and mark those questions before you turn on your recorder. Even if you pick out only a dozen questions, you will be able to record some sense of