

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

## *How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

### PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW

With adequate preparation, family interviews can be very rewarding and productive as well as fun. This article covers all aspects of interviewing family members from the best way to set up an interview session to selecting interview questions to how to conduct the interview. Please read the following carefully to find out what you should know before getting started. This will help to make the most of your interviews and thereby avoid unnecessary follow-ups.

**Prepare List Of Possible Interviewees:** Start by compiling a list of family members to be interviewed. You as the genealogist must decide which people are most likely to have the facts needed whether it is family members, neighbors, friends, etc. I use the term “family members” for all of these sources going forward.

**Learn As Much As Possible Before The Interview:** The next step is to learn about the family member(s) in as much detail as possible prior to the interview. When were they born? Where were they raised? What are their occupations? You as the interviewer should spend sufficient time learning about the family members ahead of time to guide the interview to accurately get access to their relevant memories.

**Prepare Question List:** If the information needed is about one person, the question list should be tailored to that person. If a group of relatives are interviewed at the same time, many of the listed questions may not be appropriate however be prepared to ask follow-up questions that help to bring out all significant details (locations, dates, etc.).

**What To Take To The Interview:** Interviewers should always be prepared. The interviewer's toolkit should include a cassette recorder (even if a recorded interview is not anticipated), several spare tapes, spare batteries, a still or video camera, pads of paper, pens and pencils. Memory joggers such as photographs, old letters, and copies of newspapers from the past are also helpful. A small treat or gift is also a good way to thank people for being generous enough to let you interview them. All of these items can be kept in a bag similar to a laptop bag and they do help to jog memories!

**Prepare The Interviewee(s):** Although journalists appreciate off-the-cuff comments, genealogical interviewers are most successful if their subjects know exactly what will happen during an interview and are prepared beforehand. It is easy to establish this tone at the outset by sending the interviewee a copy of the questions that will be the basis of the exchange, as well as copies of at least some of the photographs, old letters, or newspapers that will be part of the interview. Before sending off a copy of the interview questions, the researcher should review them to ensure they provide the answers he or she is seeking.

**Interview Length:** Once one or more family members have been selected to be interviewed, they must be contacted so that mutually agreeable appointments can be scheduled. The interviews should last one to two hours. If travel time and distance make additional visits difficult to schedule, single interviews that are several hours long can be scheduled. It is preferable to conduct in-person interviews as opposed to phone interviews however phone interviews may be the only choice in some situations. This is covered below. During long interviews, breaks every hour or hour and a half may be needed to avoid fatigue. Breaks also give the family member(s) a chance to think about what has been said and perhaps remember additional information.

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

## *How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

**Scheduling Interviews:** Holidays and other family gatherings can be good times to conduct interviews. If these opportunities do not lend themselves to quality interview time, use these events to schedule visits or phone interviews. Make sure that you have a calendar with you and after the event call or email the family members that agreed to appointments to remind them of the appointment dates and times. Also, consider interviewing married couples, siblings, or other closely related individuals together. This is not only more practical for you, but it helps the family member(s) involved to remember things long ago forgotten! An answer by one family member will jog the memory of another to add additional valuable information.

**Capturing Information:** I always use yellow legal pads and pencils to record answers. As the interviews progress, many changes in time lines, etc. may occur as memories start to become more focused. If you prefer to record the interview (which I do not recommend for in-person interviews), always ask permission to record the interview. Phone conversations are best suited to recording long-distance interviews in my experience. The transcription process can be very laborious regardless of whether you record in-person interviews or phone interviews. I like to use the notepads for in-person interviews because I find that as I write, more memories come back to the interviewees and it helps to keep things moving at a reasonable pace. They normally watch what I am writing and that simple fact seems to help jog additional memories.

**When to Record Interviews:** Phone interviews (especially if they are long distance) may be better suited to recording. In any case, it is best to have a notebook handy so that you can jot down additional (clarification) questions for lengthy answers, etc. Once a family member starts a long answer to a question I find that it is best NOT to interrupt them. Let them continue regardless of how mundane the answer appears to become – at some point or at many points, the answer will yield additional information that can be valuable at a future point. This is true for recorded interviews as well as interviews that are captured to notepads. Keep in mind that you should ask for permission to record the interview.

**Interviewing vs. “Fill In The Forms”:** By the way, it is best to conduct actual interviews as opposed to mailing or emailing questionnaires. We are trying to retrieve memories that have not been accessed in years or perhaps decades. A questionnaire is too sterile and normally will not produce the optimum results. Also, the family member(s) may be a little apprehensive initially whether you send a form or attempt to interview them. Because of that fact they will not provide the required information on the form simply because they cannot remember however they will attempt to fill in as many details as they can.

**Additional Recommendations:** Ask questions beginning with *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and especially *why* and *how*. Avoid yes-or-no questions except to introduce a new topic or clarify a point. Also, I usually ask for (or bring) photos from the past as conversation starters. This helps to break the ice and get the conversation flowing quickly.

While parents can be an excellent source of information, and great-grandparents obviously could tell many stories of interest, most genealogical information attributable to “family lore” will come from grandparents. This makes sense, since extensive contact with great-grandparents is rare, and grandparents will normally know more family history than parents.

Grandparents might just remember stories that *their* grandparents told. Thus, by asking grandparents about the family, it is sometimes possible to gain information about two generations older than them. Of course, grandparents’ siblings – great aunts and uncles, if alive, should not be overlooked, for they could have more extensive or different memories about the common ancestors.

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

## *How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following question list is organized in a way that memories can best be accessed. The questions are not necessarily all inclusive, nor mandatory. They are a suggested list of questions that are needed to accurately complete a family tree starting with a 6 generation tree and it provides the basis for expansion beyond 6 generations. It is organized in a sequence that is typical of a person's life history however questions can be selected from each group to jog memories and you will probably achieve similar results. Keep in mind, however that the sequence is important. Please start with the first group and progress from there if you decide to select individual questions. There are enough questions listed to accommodate your needs.

#### **The Early Years:**

- When were you born? (Month, Day & Year)
- Where were you born? Domestic: (address or hospital, City, County, State) International: as much similar information as possible. Please use the same scenario for International information going forward
- What is the meaning of your name?
- Were you named after another person? If so, whom and why?
- What is your mother's full name (include maiden name if known)? What is her birth date? (Month, Day & Year)
- Where was she born (address or hospital, City, County and State)?
- What is your father's full name? What was his birth date? (Month, Day & Year) Where was he born (address or hospital, City, County and State)?
- How did your parents meet? Where did they meet? When were they married? (Month, Day, Year) Where were they married (Location, City, County, State)?
- List as many grandparents as possible including birth dates, birth locations (including address or hospital, City, County and State – if deceased provide death date, death location including address or hospital, City, County and State)
- List as many great-grandparents as possible including birth dates, birth locations (including address or hospital, City, County and State – if deceased provide death date, death location including address or hospital, City, County and State)
- Who's the oldest relative you remember and what do you remember about him or her? (Include birth date, birth location, places lived, occupation(s). If deceased, death date & where the death occurred, if known). These details are necessary for close relatives however they are extremely important as you collect information on ancestors beyond parents and grandparents. Not all details will be remembered however collect as much information as possible.
- Who are your siblings? (By name, birth date, birth location including address or hospital, City, County, State – if deceased – death date, death location including address or hospital, City, County and State)
- What was it like living with them? (This should be good!!!)

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

## *How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

### **Where they lived**

- Where did you live growing up? (List all locations if possible including dates, addresses, Cities, Counties and States).
- Who lived in your childhood home(s)?
- Where have you lived since childhood? (List all locations if possible including dates, addresses, Cities, Counties and States).

### **Education**

- Where did you go to school(s)? List all schools including school names, locations (including addresses, Cities, Counties & States) dates of attendance and general subject matter if appropriate.
- What were your favorite subjects and why?
- What was your least favorite aspect of school and why?
- Who were your school friends and what did you do together?
- Who were your best teachers?

### **Employment**

- What was your first job? (Include dates of employment)
- What did you do with your first paycheck?
- List additional places of employment including dates, locations (including addresses, Cities, Counties and States)
- How did you decide to pursue your career?
- When did you retire (if retired)?

### **Marriage and Children**

- How did you meet your spouse?
- Where did you go on your first date?
- When did you know you wanted to marry your spouse?
- Tell me about your wedding day including location (address or church, City, County and State).
- Tell me about the day your first child was born (including birth date, address or hospital, City, County and State).
- List all children in the same way – (birth date, address or hospital, City, County and State).
- How did you choose your child(ren)'s name(s)?
- What are your happiest memories of your children?
- What about your children makes you the most proud?

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

## *How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

### INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

As you can see, questions should be short and simple. For example, ask "Do you remember your sister Anne's wedding?" instead of "Do you remember your sister's wedding and who the best man was and where the wedding breakfast was held and how your parents felt about the match?" You can get all of that information however you need to ask the questions one step at a time. The family member may become tense when too much is demanded at one time. Trying to remember several parts of one question may be so distracting that the interviewee overlooks important details when responding.

**Memorize Questions & Sequence In Advance:** Experienced interviewers never read their questions. The questions have been memorized and blend into the conversation. As the interview progresses, the note pad becomes important. Facial expressions, the eyes, and other non-verbal expressions are noted. Additional questions may come to mind that can be jotted down for inclusion when the moment is appropriate. Reminders of promises made should also be written down, so that they can be kept rather than forgotten, once the interview is over.

**Be On Time:** The first rule of interviewing is punctuality. Never keep the interviewee(s) waiting. After the interviewer has been invited in and is seated with the interviewee(s), it is helpful to discuss any equipment that will be used such as a tape recorder or video camera. Otherwise bring out the legal pad and ask permission to take notes. You are attempting to put your interviewees at ease and these steps will help to do so.

**Put Your Interviewee(s) At Ease:** The moments before the interview can also be used to take photographs of the interviewee(s) and the surroundings. This get-acquainted time also provides opportunity to look at some of the photographs or other memorabilia brought by the interviewer. Perhaps the subject will produce her or his own photo album. The album or other mementos will help the interviewee(s) remember and may provide the interviewer with new evidence that has not yet been discussed or seen. This is the right moment to initiate the interview.

**Conducting The Interview:** As the interview progresses, you will find that they will be able to access memories that have long been buried and they will enjoy the process! Once the interview is underway, please remember that the interview is all about them – do NOT interject your recollections or opinions unless asked to do so. If you are doing your job correctly they become a wealth of genealogical information. The key is to keep them relaxed and to keep the interview moving at a reasonable rate. If the interview stalls, they may become uncomfortable and it will be more difficult for them to remember important information. If you see this happening, you should re-initiate the "get-acquainted" step by introducing a photo that you may have forgotten to show previously, or ask them about a photo that was not discussed previously, etc. This will help to get the interview back on track quickly. Keeping these points in mind will allow them to enjoy the trip down memory lane as much as you enjoy collecting the valuable genealogical research information!

**Transcribe Recorded Interviews As Soon As Possible:** After the interview has ended, the interviewer should take time to transcribe the sound or video tape as soon as possible. It will be much easier to understand the subject's comments while they are still fresh in the interviewer's mind. Within a week of the interview, a transcript should be provided to the interviewee(s). They will then have the opportunity to correct any errors. At this time they can even add facts that came to mind after the interview or during the reading of the transcript. After the subject has returned the transcript it is ready for analysis and verification.

# THE FAMILY INTERVIEWS

*How To Maximize Your Interview Time*

## CONCLUSION

By following the preceding steps you should be well on your way to building your family tree accurately. I welcome any comments, recommendations for improvements and hope that you find this guide to be helpful and enlightening.

Best regards,

William S. Dixon



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bill Dixon is a recognized genealogist, author and speaker. He has hosted genealogy events all over the country and has written a 400+ page book on his family history going back several generations. Bill's passion is to help others traverse the often-time murky waters associated with Internet based research and he is developing a step-by-step approach to verifiable genealogy research. He can be reached by email at [Bill@dixon-genealogy.com](mailto:Bill@dixon-genealogy.com).