

Interview Questions

Here is a list of questions that can serve as prompts for your personal history, or as the basis for an interview of a family member.

- How long did your family live in the area(s)?
- Were there other family members in the area? Who?
- Did you live on a farm? What kind of crops did you grow?
- What kind of livestock or other animals did you keep?
- Did you have any pets?
- What was the house or apartment like? How many rooms?
- What kind of amenities did it have? (indoor plumbing, electricity or gas, phone, television, etc.)
- Were there any special items in the house that stand out in your mind (favorite possessions of yours, your parents, or siblings)?
- What kind of area/neighborhood was it?
- Did the town have a railroad? Post office? What kind of stores or shops?
- What was your family's religious affiliation?
- Where did you go to church?
- What religious ceremonies did you take part in?
- Did you have godparents or sponsors?
- Where did you go to school?
- What level of education do you have?
- What was your favorite subject to study?
- Did you have any special interests when you were growing up (sports, hobbies, crafts, etc.)?
- What kind of games did you play?
- What was your favorite toy?
- What did you do for fun (go to beach, park, movies, zoo, etc.)?
- Did your family ever take trips or go on vacation?
- Do you speak any foreign languages?
- Did you have family reunions?
- Who were your friends when you were growing up?
- Who were the close friends of the family?
- Describe the personalities of your family members.
- Are there any physical characteristics that run in your family?
- Were there any serious illnesses in your family?
- Do any illnesses run in the family?
- Were there any memorable traditions that your family practiced?
- Can you remember any stories that were told to you as a child (fictional, folklore, or real life)?



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- What events from your childhood stand out in your memory (historical, personal, familial, storms or disasters, fire, etc.)?
- What inventions or developments changed your life, and how?
- What was your father's occupation? Where did he work?
- Did your mother work? Where?
- Did you work? Where?
- Did anyone in your family ever serve in the military?
- Did anyone in your family ever hold a public office?
- What was your favorite song?
- Did anyone in your family play a musical instrument?
- What were your family's favorite meals? Are there any special family recipes?
- Were certain foods eaten or avoided on certain occasions?
- Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?
- What kind of organizations did your family belong to (fraternal, charitable, scouting, etc.)?
- What special skills do you have?
- How did you come into your profession?
- When did you move away from home?
- Have you ever been married? If so, to whom? When?
- Where did you meet your husband/wife?
- Did you exchange any special gifts?
- How long did you date before getting married?
- Where did you get married?
- Who participated in your wedding?
- Did you have a reception? Was there music? What songs were played?
- Do you have a copy of your wedding invitation?
- Was there an announcement in the newspaper? Which paper?

Interview Tips

1. Some relatives may hesitate at the sign of a microphone, so be prepared to take notes if you notice your interview target seems uncomfortable.
2. Instead of asking what month Great-Grandma died, ask for memories of the funeral. How old were you? Who was there? (If you know when someone in attendance died it might help narrow down the time frame.) What was the weather like—was it summer or winter? Was it around a holiday? If the event took place at a home, where was it? Go for more than just names and dates.
3. Family stories can become garbled over time. Ask different family members what they remember of the story. Then compare the different versions and look for common threads.
4. If you take notes during an interview or while the family is swapping stories, make sure you go back and re-write your notes as soon as possible. If you wait too long (or have illegible handwriting) you may find yourself looking at your notes months down the road wondering wondering what you were originally trying to say.
5. Let the conversation take a natural course. If you try to steer it too much, you may lose the interview. Gentle questions can help stimulate memories, but let the stories flow and you may find you get more than you even hoped for.