

# Genealogy Tips: Sample Questions for Interviewing Older Relatives

Presented by Bobby Joe Seales

Capturing the recollections of older relatives is an important part of family history research. Record those oral histories while your family's elders are still around.

The art of capturing older relatives' personal histories requires no writing at all – oral histories can be done using either a tape recorder or video camera. Oral histories are ideal for several reasons: they require no laborious writing; they are quite natural to compose (most people are better talkers than writers); and the oral narrative does not need to be continuous as you can record events and thoughts in any order you wish and then, in transcribing, put them in an appropriate organizational pattern.

Video is great in that it captures the subject in action, telling their life story in their own voice, showing facial expressions and gestures so future generations can see the people and objects that are most important to the subject. Oral histories recorded on video can be simple or complex, and may include music, sound effects, titles, optical effects, or interviews with other family members.

To interview an older relative, start at the beginning. Open with questions about their childhood and teenage years, to prod their memory and get the conversation going.

Here is a list of 42 questions. Choose a few of the ones you like best and use them to get that oral history started.

- (1) What is the earliest event in life you can remember? Tell me about it.
- (2) How did your parents choose your name?
- (3) Where did you grow up? If you grew up in more than one place, do you remember how you felt about having to move? Tell me about your childhood home.
- (4) How did you travel or go to places in those days?
- (5) What are the names of your brothers and sisters, in order? Do you remember how you felt and what you did when your younger brothers and sisters were born (if applicable; if not, do you know what they thought about you when you were born)?
- (6) What experiences do you remember having with your brothers and sisters?
- (7) Did you have any other relatives that you were close to? Did you have a favorite aunt or uncle? Did you meet or know your grandparents? Other relatives?
- (8) What kind of things did you do for fun?
- (9) Did your family or friends have any nicknames for you? If so, who gave you that and/or called you that, and what did they call you? Why did they call you that? Were there any nicknames for any of your brothers or sisters? If so, what were they and why were they called that? Did your nickname change over the years or stop being used?
  
- (10) What chores did your parents have you do? What was your favorite and what was your least favorite? How did you feel in general about doing the chores? Did you receive an allowance? If you did was it based on what chores you did

or was it a “set amount”?

(11) Did you have any pets growing up? What were their names and what kind of animal were they?

(12) Who were your best friends in your childhood?

(13) What was Christmas like when you were younger? Did it change as you got older?

(14) Did you have a special way of celebrating birthdays? What special family traditions did you have?

(15) Were there any other special holidays that your family celebrated? What traditions were used during those holidays?

(16) What religious rites did you go through?

(17) How did you feel about school? What did you do well in school? What did you do poorly in? Which teachers did you like the best? Do you remember the names of your schools and where they were located? Do you know if that school is still there? Tell me about your favorite teacher.

(18) Did you ever have any unusual or exciting adventures when you were a child?

(19) What was an embarrassing experience you had as a child (that you feel comfortable talking about)?

(20) Did you like to read as a child? What types of books did you read (include the titles if you remember)? What were your favorite radio or television programs? How often did you listen to or watch radio or television programs? What singers/groups did you like to listen to?

(21) Do you remember any major historical events from this time period? How did they affect your life (if at all)?

(22) What were some of the things you wanted to do “when you grew up”?

(23) Did you get into trouble? What was the worst thing you did?

- (24) Do you remember the prices/costs of anything from this time period?
- (25) Describe your surroundings when you were a child. Can you picture the kitchen?
- (26) Where did you live? Tell me about your home.
- (27) What was your favorite activity/activities as a teenager?
- (28) What was school like as a teenager? Was there something you were especially good at in school? What school activities did you participate in? How did you feel about school? What did you do well in school? What did you do poorly in? Which teachers did you like the best? Do you remember the names of your schools and where they were located? Do you know if that school is still there?
- (29) What books did you read? What were your favorite radio or television programs? How often did you listen to or watch radio or television programs?
- (30) What was teenage music like then? What was your favorite kind? Do you remember some of the songs you particularly liked? What singers/groups did you like to listen to?
- (31) Did you go to school dances? If so, what were they like? How did the teenagers dance then (what were some of the types/names of dances)?
- (32) Who was your first girl/boyfriend? How old were you?
- (33) How often did you date? What kinds of things did you do out on a date?
- (34) What home responsibilities did you have?
- (35) Did you ever have a job as a teenager? What was it? What kinds of tasks did you do? Do you remember what you were paid?
- (36) When did you get your first driver's license? Your first car? What was your first car?

(37) Do you remember any major historical events from this period? How did they affect your life (if at all)?

(38) Who were your friends then and what did you do with them?

(39) What made you decide on your college or career or plans for your future? What goals did you have at the time?

(40) What was the worst thing you did as a teen?

(41) Do you remember the prices/costs of anything from this period?

(42) How were young men and women expected to behave when you were a teenager?