

# COLLECTING ORAL HISTORY

The best source of family history is always family. If you have any living grandparents, by all means start there! Aunts and uncles are also great sources of information, and of course your parents. But your family is larger than you think – your parents' first cousins will also have information about earlier generations.

## ***How do I start?***

If you have a very elderly relative, don't wait until next year. Even when people are healthy, memories fade. When talking on the phone, have pencils and plenty of paper handy to take notes. For an interview in person, you can take notes, or use a tape or digital recorder. Make sure your relative is comfortable, and sit close by. Be aware that video cameras make some people self-conscious.

## ***What questions should I ask?***

Use open-ended questions, which can't be answered by a simple yes or no. Sometimes people are hesitant; just relax and be encouraging. If the person you are interviewing starts to become defensive or upset, do not press them – change the subject to more comfortable territory. Pay attention to small things, like place names and the names of distant cousins. Fit the questions to the situation, but you might ask:

### ***Childhood:***

*What is your full name? • Why did your parents pick that name? • Do you have brothers & sisters?  
When and where were you born? • How did your family come to live in that town?  
What is your earliest memory? • Tell me about the house you grew up in. • Did you have a favorite toy?  
What did you do for fun when you were young? • What chores did you have? • Which chore was worst?  
Did your family attend church? • How did religion affect your family? • What do you believe now?  
Where did you go to school? • College? • What was school like? • Was there a graduation ceremony?*

### ***Relatives:***

*Tell me a story about your mother that shows what kind of woman she was. • How about your father?  
What was your mother's maiden name? • What kinds of work did your parents do?  
What did your grandparents look like? • Do you know anything about your great-grandparents?  
Did your grandmother tell you any special stories? • Can you tell about any "black sheep" in the family?  
How did your father (mother) die? • How old were you then? • Is there a family cemetery?  
Can you describe the personalities of your aunts and uncles? • Who was your favorite cousin, and why?*

### ***Adulthood:***

*What was your first job? • How did you choose your line of work? • Did you serve in the military?  
How did you meet your spouse? • Where did you go on dates? • What was your wedding day like?  
How were you affected by large historical events (WWII, civil rights movement, 1960's counterculture)?  
What is the greatest challenge you have faced? • What has been the best day of your life so far?  
Are there any family letters, photos, recipes, or other heirlooms that have been handed down to you?*

## ***After the Interview:***

Type out a detailed summary of what was said, working from your notes or the tape. Do this while your memory is fresh, because there may be portions of the notes or tape which are unclear. Be aware that you will usually not get the best stories on a first interview. So think about what your relative told you, talk to other family members, and then have a follow-up conversation!