

## Oral History Project Guidelines

1. **Before you interview anyone, give advance warning.** Explain what you want to do, why you want to do it. You may want to write a letter or send an email. By writing, you've given your subject a chance to start thinking about the topics you're interested in, and you may have even jogged their memory.
2. **Think out your questions beforehand.** Write your questions on a sheet of paper, organized by subject. One easy way to organize what you want to ask is by years: Start with your subject's earliest years, and move on from there.
3. **Use a tape recorder if you interview your subject in person.** A tape recorder catches every bit of information, including the way your talkers sound and exactly how they answer questions.
4. **Bring a notebook and pen.** Even if you have a tape recorder, always take handwritten notes. During the interview, write down names and dates, and double-check them with your subject. Facts are important, but the most important information your talkers offer are their stories.
5. **Be ready to ask the same question a few different ways.** Try to find a couple of ways to ask important questions. If you ask "when" something happened, the answer will often be "I don't know," because the talker doesn't recall the exact date or year. Instead of asking "when," ask the question in relation to another event. For example, did an event take place before or after they got married, or before or after their parents died? You can also begin the question with "About how old were you when . . ." Using these techniques, you're more likely to get answers.
6. **Ask to see any family treasures your relatives own.** When your talkers bring out an heirloom or photograph, ask them to describe what you're looking at. Who or what is it? How was it used? Who made it? Who gave it to them? Ask if there are any stories connected with it, or any documents.
7. **Ask for songs, poems, unusual memories.** You may discover something wonderful when you ask your subject if they recall the rhymes they used to recite while jumping rope as a child, or the hymns they sang in church. Probe a little here—ask about childhood games and memories, smells and tastes and sounds. Here are a few suggestions:

**Personal Information.** What is your name and maiden name? What is your date of birth? What is your place of birth? How many brothers and sisters did you have? Were you the oldest or youngest child?

**Home and community life.** Where did you live as a child? What do you remember about the house you lived in? How many bedrooms did it have? Where did most of the family activities go on? What was the neighborhood like? What kind of people lived there? What did you do for fun? Who else lived in the neighborhood? What kinds of activities went on there? What styles of clothing did children wear then? Describe your neighborhood when you were a teenager. What music, clothing, and food were popular during your teenage years? How much did candy, movies, clothing, etc., cost? Describe your school. (The building, classroom, teacher, subjects offered, schedule, homework, etc.) What did people do for amusement? (Consider forms of entertainment, hobbies, sports, collections, etc.) What illnesses were threatening to the health of the community? (What vaccinations did you have to have?) What were the rules of your house?

**Economic conditions.** "How did the family earn money? Who worked? How did your family compare to others in the neighborhood—richer or poorer or in the middle? Who handled the family finances? Were there any major economic setbacks? Were there any big successes? What kinds of things did the family spend money on?"

**Life as an Adult.** When did you leave home? Why did you leave and where did you go? What jobs did you have throughout your life? What did your job(s) entail? Did you enjoy your work? What was your first job? How old were you at the time? How did you get your job? What different jobs have you had during your life? Did you attend college? If so, what did you study? Did you serve in the military? Where have you lived? When did you get married? Where were your children born? Include their names. Did you have any dangerous and/or life threatening experiences? If so, what happened? What presidents (or national leaders) do you recall? What were some of the important news (current) events that you remember? How did you receive the news? What wars did you experience directly or indirectly? What was your experience? How did the Great Depression affect you? Describe your kitchen and school rooms. What technological items were in these places? What were some of the new inventions? Describe the cars that you owned. What were some other modes of transportation you have taken?

**Life in the Old Country and the trip over (for immigrants).** When and why did you come to the United States? How old were you when you arrived? Where did you come from and where and when did you arrive? How did you travel? By boat, plane, or train? How long did the trip take? What feelings did you have about coming to the United States? Did any member of the family come to America before you? Who, when, and why did they? What did you do when you came here? What kind of work did you do in the Old Country? What did you do for entertainment in the Old Country? Are you a citizen of the United States? Are you the first generation in the United States? What was one of the biggest differences between the United States and your previous home?