

How Oral Histories Bring Family Stories to Life

Your family and friends may not think they're interesting, but it's up to you to ask questions that prove them wrong

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| May 8, 2024

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"I have spent long hours sitting with my mother, age 90, and her brother, 92, listening to them talk about their misspent youths, and asking questions here and there," says Helen Chapman, a Kentucky author who loves collecting oral histories. "Some of their stories have wound up in my books, things like the boys following the garbage wagon up the back alleys carrying bats (they looked like cricket bats). The garbage was put out in bushel baskets. The basket would be dumped and rats would jump out. The boys would try and catch the rats 'on the wing' as it were."



"Oral histories preserve the personal recollections that might otherwise disappear." | Credit: Getty

To get them started, Chapman says, "All I'd have to do is ask my uncle for my great-great grandmother's recipe for fruit cake or chicken soup and we'd be off to the races. Or I'd fix a meal like my grandmother made when they were young, like sauerfleisch (sour spiced pork) and potato dumplings. We'd wind up talking at the table until the gravy solidified into a loaf."

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Considered the gathering of information about events that happened to or were experienced by people, whether from a family, community or other collective, oral histories preserve the personal recollections that might otherwise disappear. Some say oral histories started when humans began to talk and that cave drawings and hieroglyphics are pictorial depictions of those histories.

They picked up in popularity in the 1960s as portable tape recorders became more accessible. "Popularity increased again as the Covid pandemic and social isolation set in," says Zach Ellis, founder and CEO of TheirStory, Inc. "We developed more of an intellectual need for human connection so there was probably an uptick in that time."

TheirStory is a remote interviewing platform that helps communities collect, preserve and engage with the audiovisual stories of their members. "We had a limit to in-person meetings, then Zoom came along," Ellis says. "Often this interchange is just as useful remotely, cheaply and geographically. A lot of podcasters are oral historians."

Collecting Histories, Facing Questions

Organizations, businesses and universities started collecting memories. Their interests range from the Borscht Belt Museum in Ellenville, New York, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, New York's Museum of Modern Art and the USC Shoah Foundation in Los Angeles, which started as a way to chronicle the [Holocaust](#).

When you decide to collect oral histories, you face a lot of questions. The first is whether you try to become proficient and comfortable with the process (by reading or taking classes/webinars) or just jump in because some people in your family are older or frail and may not live long enough for you to do enough learning.

In addition to TheirStory, you can find how-to lessons, questions to ask and other tips and ideas on such sites as Oral History Summer School, NPR's [StoryCorps](#), Baylor University Institute for Oral History, A Life Untold, and Ancestry.com.

As an example, The Institute for Oral History offers a selection of training workshops each year and participants can attend from the comfort of their own home or office.



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On a trip to Holland, I discovered clues to my family background

One major problem you may face is your family and friends may not think they're interesting. It's up to you to ask questions that prove them wrong.

Barbara Mistrik, a retired architect, says, "I'm researching family history in advance of a reunion where I want to make what I find available to cousins. I am now the crone and oldest cousin of some 22 original first cousins. I have already clarified a couple of questions about my Slovak grandparents, parents and that grandmother's half-brothers."

"There are so many questions I never asked my grandparents on both sides and I'm sad about that."

She continues, "Interestingly both half-brothers died noteworthy deaths. One was the only death in a Pittsburgh public pool that season and the other was at my aunt's wedding reception. Both died of heart attacks, but the circumstances put the deaths in the news. I do remember stuff my younger cousins weren't around to witness and I hope some are interested to hear. Like our oldest aunt, I am the only one to visit my grandfather's village in (now) Slovakia."

New York publicist Lisa Hancock-Janey says, "I think oral histories are terrific and I plan on recording my dad and mom on my next trip to visit them. There are so many questions I never asked my grandparents on both sides and I'm sad about that."

When asked what her first question will be, she says, "If you could've been anything else in the world, what would you have liked to be?" With that question out of the way, the real history begins."

Asking Open-Ended Questions

Note both Mistrik and Hancock-Janey are asking open-ended questions that need narrative responses rather than yes/no replies. Another starting point can be a [photo album](#) or home movies. Ask if the wedding dress was hand or custom-made, by whom? Was it handed down? Did the family gather frequently or just on special occasions? Finding the list of top-ten popular songs or newspaper headlines at a specific time can trigger memories.

The questions I regret not asking my father was did he know about the Statue of Liberty when he and his family came to this country? Did he see it as they sailed into New York Harbor? I've asked the cousins (children) of his older siblings and they never asked their parents either.

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Ellis says, "We found when recording stories with our parents that it was easiest to start by recording each person's favorite life stories. You know, the ones you've heard them tell 1,000 times and you always roll your eyes at, before asking deeper questions. This serves as an easy way for everyone to get used to the format and technology, and just to get comfortable having and recording meaningful conversations."

Capturing the Interview

Steven Sielaff, Senior Editor & Collection Manager, [Baylor University Institute for Oral History \(BUIOH\)](#); Editor in Chief, Sound Historian, [Texas Oral History Association \(TOHA\)](#); and Associate Director, [Oral History Association \(OHA\)](#) says, "I love the oral history industry and the variety of interviews. They're some of the friendliest people who are interested in talking to new people and exploring new horizons.

"It's important," says Sielaff, "to record the interview in a quiet room. The sense of smell is important if cookies are baking or someone's smoking grandpa's favorite cigar."

For another prompt, he suggests "a map of the area where the family grew up," perhaps an old one and a current one to notice the differences." He thinks a small recorder, maybe \$200, works well. "Turn it on and put it on a nearby table and everyone forgets about it." Also, don't interrupt. Do ask follow-up questions.

Depending on how many people you interview, you're likely to hear different facets of a person's life. Someone may have been known as a class clown or life of the party by some and a straight-laced business person by others.

Since the popularity of DNA tests, there have been a large number of "[parent not expected](#)" results. This could result from an unmentioned adoption, sperm or egg donor, or promiscuity. You might want to consider how this will be treated. The film "[Stories We Tell](#)" by Sarah Polley might help you resolve your issues in case the topic arises.

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[Judy Colbert](#), the author of 36 books, writes about travel and the business of travel. [Read More](#)