

*Family and Regional History Program
Wallace State College
P.O. Box 2000
Hanceville, AL 35077 USA
Phone: (256) 352-8265*

CONDUCTING A FAMILY INTERVIEW

by Robert S. Davis, Jr.

Where do you begin when you want to learn about your ancestors and about your family's history? The answer is with your own family. Unless you are an adopted or the last known (to you) living survivor of your immediate family, you have kinsmen with memories of your family in years past. We have books on conducting family interviews, including Bill Zimmerman, How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies; Stephen and Julia arthur, Your Life & Times: How to put a Life Story on Tape--An Oral History Handbook; Robert U. Akeret, Family Tales, Family Wisdom; and Timothy W. Polk, How to Outlive Your Lifetime.

Almost everyone has an "Aunt Maude," a legendary human archive of the family history. In fact, most families have several such persons and many researchers are surprised to learn of cousins of the same age or younger who know a great deal about their family. Frequently family traditions are better kept in some branches of a family tree than others. Also, some cousins will have Bible records, private letters, diaries, photographs, and even collections of family research not found elsewhere.

Barrels of ink has been expended in books and articles on how to approach other family members about common family history. Any good "how to" book on genealogy has chapters on the subject. However, the experience of interviewing relatives is different with everyone and sometimes valuable tidbits are picked up from other peoples' experiences that are not covered in more formal texts. Here are the basics I cover.

Everyone starting on their family tree research is told two statements that invariably prove to be false: "no one is left who really knows anything about the family" and "yes, Aunt (fill in the blank) is old enough to know some things but I doubt she would help you if she could". Persistence brings out that there is more family knowledge floating around than expected. In fact, you always discover that some of the people who initially claimed to know nothing open up with some real gems as you learn facts that prod their memories. Cantankerous Aunt Maudes who allegedly are not speaking to your branch of the family almost always proves to be nonsense. Researchers have been amazed to learn of non-talkative relatives who were not aware that they were refusing to talk with anyone. Contacting such people can not only give you invaluable data but also can help introduce you to family members you just barely knew and can help bring your scattered family together as people sharing the deepest of common bonds. I know of a family that each year holds a huge family reunion simply because they were brought together by a published genealogy (history of their family). As children, most these people did not have close nit families and had never had reunions. Now this genealogical research allows them each year to have a big, extended, gathering of a family of cousins--the reunions and the family they never had as children.

The first step in setting up such an interview is contact. The best means of contact is by letter, although sometimes, when you do not have an address, you must use the phone first. When all that you have is a name and a location and telephone information fails to put you in touch with the person you are seeking, you may have to resort to methods that bear more of a resemblance to private detective work than family history. Such methods will be covered in later columns.

If you must call your Aunt Maude, be careful about when you call. Remember your time zones. (I never cease to be amazed at the people in California who presume it is the same time everywhere as it is in Los Angeles.) When selecting a time to call to avoid times when the person you are trying to reach may be at work or having dinner. When you do call, ask if then is a good time to call. Clearly identify yourself and your presumed kinship. Do not try to conduct your interview over the phone but if your Aunt Maude has information that can be helpful, make arrangements for a visit at a time and date that works for her.

Even if you called first, it is usually best to also write (the most common exception being when the person you want to interview lives close by.) Your letter should be brief and to the point. Never ask for "everything you have on the family" but explain that you are interested in your family and would like to SHARE information. If you cannot type the letter, be careful to write legibly. Two rules always apply when writing to someone about genealogy (they are also pretty good rules for whenever you are writing someone): 1) always include a regular size, self addressed, stamped envelope for a reply; 2) always include your return address on your letter (in case the envelope is thrown away by the person receiving the letter). If you have a one page family chart or other concise summary of your ancestry as you know it, you might include a copy of it with your letter (never send or accept the original of anything to anybody at any time). Try to arrange for an interview and only if that is not possible begin trying to obtain the information by mail. We have in our collection a copy of Handbook for Genealogical Correspondence.

For your interview, you will need a tape recorder. Never depend on written notes or, heaven forbid, your memory of what was said. Use a machine that uses the standard cassette tapes. If you have one of those old machines that uses spools of tape, send it to the Smithsonian or some other museum and buy a new tape recorder (they are not expensive). Don't use a hand held memo tape recorder for interviews. The person speaking may be intimidated by the having it stuck in their face (for the same reason use of home video equipment is also discouraged). Remember also that older people tend to speak in soft voices and a small tape recorder may not pick them up clearly. Your tape recorder should be large enough that it can clearly pick up a person speaking in a low voice from at least five feet away. Such a tape recorder is unobtrusive and easily forgotten by the speaker. Don't intimidate the person speaking by making them wear or speak into a microphone.

Choose a tape recorder that uses batteries but also has an AC adapter. You want to use the AC Adapter (the plug in) if at all possible but be ready with fresh batteries if needed. Your Aunt Maude may not have electricity (even today some people do not) or she may take you on a room to room tour of her family heirlooms. I once taped my grandmother as she introduced me to family members buried in a church cemetery! A tape recorder with all of the features

described above can be bought for under twenty dollars and you can probably readily borrow such a machine.

When you arrive to interview your relative, you should have your battery powered cassette tape recorder with built in microphone and AC adapter, a notebook, and ink pens. Some genealogists also bring maps of where the family had lived and a camera for copying photographs. Some people or their spouses bring along a video camera to film the interview. (Be warned, however, that many people are intimidated by cameras and microphones.) Be dressed in a business like way. One rule of thumb is to be dressed as you would if you were going to the bank to plead for a loan. Eat a couple of hours before you go for your visit; don't presume that you will be invited to lunch. Finally be sure of your directions before you leave home and carry with you a phone number to call if you are lost. You do not want it remembered in the family about how drove past Aunt Maude's house several times, in full view of Aunt Maude, without stopping.

Just because you have a tape recorder, however, don't forget to also bring pen and paper. You will want to bring some questions along that are prepared in advance. As your relative tells the family history, you can also be writing questions about points you would like for them to expand upon or where you are unclear. Save these questions for when they have stopped talking. (Even I run out of steam eventually.) Just as the village historian in Roots had to start at the beginning and continue uninterrupted to the end, so too do most of us tell our stories. If you interrupt your Aunt Maude in her narration, you could break her concentration and perhaps lose information that you might otherwise have received. There will always be time for questions later.

Some tact and common sense must be used, however. You probably don't want four hours of tape on your Aunt Maude's views on fluoridation as a Communist conspiracy. With some people, staying on beam is a very real problem but with others you must be patient when the person "has a unique way of getting to the point of a story."

You begin an interview by allowing the tape recorder to run for about forty-five seconds, to guarantee that nothing is lost by the tape winding. Next, you speak into the tape recorder, giving the name of the person conducting the interview, the date, and the place where the interview is taking place. You next ask the persons being interviewed for their full names. A popular opening for an interview, is to next ask the persons being interviewed for their date and place of birth, parents, etc. As the interview proceeds, follow the family in logical sequence, generation by generation. Do not forget to ask about brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, etc. as well as parents, grandparents, great grandparents, etc.

In conducting your interview, remember that you are tackling two different problems. As a genealogist, you want the "vital statistics," i.e. names, births, deaths, marriages, divorces, military service, pensions, Indian claims, places where events took place, etc. However, as a family historian, you also want the how and the why. You want to know why the family moved from one place to another, the tales of the Civil War, the legends of your family in the old country. Alex Haley built Roots around oral interviews on front porches on Summer nights. Your ancestors and kinsmen will become flesh and bone to you in the same way. However, these

family stories, although sometimes proving to be untrue, often led you to valuable records sources that can give you detailed information on your family.

Not everything your Aunt Maude tells you will be the complete and unbiased truth. Sometimes you will even know or suspect that something you are hearing is baloney. My advice is to not argue although you may later want to tactfully ask why your kinsman account of the events differs from what you heard elsewhere. You need to record what is suspect as well as what you think is fact. Sometimes what you thought was myth proves, eventually, to be correct. I could start a column called "Strange But True" of stories that sounded suspect but were proven, sometimes to my embarrassment, to be right on the money. Also, sometimes it is even more important to know why someone "misbelieved" something than it is to know the truth. Remember that you are there to obtain information, not start an argument.

You obviously will have to do some speaking into the tape recorder, when questions are necessary or when the person being interviewed asks you questions. Always be polite but remember that you are there to obtain information, not to hear yourself talk. Turn off the tape recorder only when asked to do so by the person being interviewed. Tape recorder tape is inexpensive but information can be priceless. You can afford to waste a few minutes of tape on nothing rather than risk having your Aunt Maude tell you some great tale while you have forgotten to turn the recorder back on! (Be sure to remember to bring lots of blank tape.)

Invariably, your kinsman will wait until the tape recorder is off to tell you some things that, in the words of my Great Uncle Walter, "I would just as soon not make public knowledge." Remember, your first priority is to get your information; getting it on tape is secondary. One trick that I use is to remember the dark secrets that are shared when the tape recorder is turned off and then put them on tape myself when I am driving home after the interview, on the same tape as the interview. Remember when the interview is finally over to punch out the tabs on the back of the tape cassettes so that the tapes cannot be erased or recorded over.

The final piece of advice on obtaining an interview is don't over stay your welcome, particularly if the relative is elderly and likely to tire easily. Plan on making another visit for another interview and be sure after any interview to write or call to thank your kinsman for sharing with you. One of the rewards of interviews, is that frequently the person being interviewed enjoyed the experience as much as the person seeking the information!

We have been talking about the bare bones basics of interviewing someone about family history. Whole books have been written on this subject. Some other things that you might consider bringing along include at least one camera. Thirty five (35mm) millimeter cameras have become so inexpensive and so easy to operate that I do not know why everyone does not have one. An easy to load and easy to use camera can start at twenty dollars. I bring a camera with black and white film for photographs that I would like to publish someday and a camera with color film for photographs for my family scrapbook or to photograph pictures of "colorful" family heirlooms. You might also want to bring along copies (not originals) of some photographs of your family to share with your "Aunt Maude".

Many genealogists never go anywhere without a box of chalk to use for rubbing on hard to read tombstones. Chalking is often necessary when you want to photograph a tombstone. It can

potentially hurt the tombstone but few of us are skilled enough at charcoal and paper rubbings or side lighting for photographs.

What if your Aunt Maude has a family Bible, some old letters, or some photographs that you need to have copied? Sometimes you luck out big time and the person being interviewed even has notes or a published family history telling you critical information. One of the golden rules of genealogy is "Never a lender or a borrower be." If at all possible arrange to have the copies made locally by the owner. If you do not have the equipment with you to photograph photographs, a local photographer could copy the photographs for a fee. Offer to pay all copying costs but as much as possible avoid being responsible for the safety of someone else's original documents, heirlooms, photographs etc. I know of some researchers who own or rent photocopy machines that they take with them on trips for copying old records. However, almost everyone these days lives near a copy machine. They are found now even in most drug stores.

If you must borrow someone else's materials for copying, take better care of the originals than you would if they were yours or you will never hear the end of it. After all, remember the owners are family.

Our program also offers for sale copies of Alice Eichholz, Discovering Your Heritage at two dollars each. In our collection, we have a copy of Beverly Whitaker, Beyond Pedigrees: Organizing and Enhancing Your Work and several basic guides to getting started in genealogy.

THE FAMILY AND REGIONAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Family and Regional History Program at Wallace State is headquartered on the fifth floor of the college library. The college is located near Cullman, Alabama, and is on Highway 31, a few miles east of Interstate-65 (take the Hanceville Highway 91 Exit), only one hour from Birmingham, Gadsden, and Huntsville. Our extensive and growing collection of research materials includes books, periodicals, microfilm, microfiche, cd-rom disks, computer programs, family folders, and much more. The hours are 8 to 8, Monday through Thursday; 8 to 4PM on Fridays; and 9 AM to 3 PM on Saturdays. The collection is completely open to the general public. The Program also offers college credit courses in genealogy from basic courses to computers to such specialties as court house, Georgia, and Civil War era research. Some courses are purely research field trips to archives and libraries across the South.