The Smithsonian Folklife *and* Oral History Interviewing Guide

Smithsonian Institution

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Introduction

PRECIOUS LEGACIES: DOCUMENTING FAMILY FOLKLORE AND COMMUNITY TRADITIONS

"Out of shared telling and remembering grow identity, connection, and pride, binding people to a place and to one another."
— Tom Rankin, Folklorist

"[Tradition-bearers] are living links in the historical chain, eye witnesses to history, shapers of a vital and indigenous way of life. They are unparalleled in the vividness and authenticity they can bring to the study of local history and culture."

— Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Folklorist

We hope that the *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* inspires you to turn to members of your own family and community as key sources of history, culture, and tradition. But where does one start? This booklet presents some guidelines Smithsonian folklorists have developed over the years for collecting folklife and oral history from family and community members. It features a general guide to conducting an interview, as well as a sample list of questions that may be adapted to your own needs and circumstances. The booklet concludes with a few examples of ways to preserve and present your findings, a selection of further readings, a glossary of key terms, and sample information and release forms.

In every community — in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools — there are people who have knowledge and skills to share — ways of knowing and doing that often come from years of experience and have been preserved and passed down across generations. As active participants in community life, these **bearers of tradition** are primary sources of culture and history. They are, as folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, "living links in the historical chain, eye witnesses to history, shapers of a vital and indigenous way of life. They are unparalleled in the vividness and authenticity they can bring to the study of local history and culture."

Through documenting their memories and stories, the past comes to life in the present, filled with vivid images of people, places, and events. And it is not only the past that we discover: we learn about the living traditions — the foodways, celebrations, customs, music, occupations, and skills — that are a vital part of daily experience. These stories, memories, and traditions are powerful expressions of community life and values. They anchor us in a larger whole, connecting us to the past, grounding us firmly in the present, giving us a sense of identity and roots, belonging and purpose.

Born in Washington, D.C., in 1881, Rosina Tucker helped to organize the first Black labor union — the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. For her family, neighbors, and members of her church community, Mrs. Tucker was a valued source of knowledge, wisdom, and local history. Photograph by Paul Wagner.

"Once a young man asked me, 'What was it like in your day?' 'My day?' I said, 'This is my day!'"

— Rosina Tucker, Washington, D.C.

Bearers of Tradition:
A tradition-bearer can be anyone — young or old — who has knowledge, skills, and experience to share: for example, a third-grader who knows the hand-clapping games shared among schoolchildren on the playground; a family member who knows about the special foods that are always prepared for holiday celebrations; or a neighbor who has lived in your community for many years and can tell you about local history and ways of life.

THE INTERVIEW

"In their rememberings are their truths."
— Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*

The memories, stories, and traditions of the people you interview grow out of firsthand knowledge and experience. Created and shaped in community life, they are continually being adapted and changed to meet new circumstances and needs. When interviewing members of your family or local community, be sure to seek out not only what they can tell you about the past, but what they can tell you about life in the present. How have certain family traditions evolved? What holiday customs are practiced today that weren't a generation ago? What special foodways and rituals are part of community celebrations and why? What skills and abilities are needed to practice a particular craft or trade? How are these skills learned, mastered, and passed on to younger generations?

Whenever possible, ask the tradition-bearer you are interviewing for stories and anecdotes about the topic you are interested in. Stories are important sources of information for the community researcher — they encapsulate attitudes and beliefs, wisdom and knowledge that lie at the heart of a person's identity and experience.

Remember that the stories and memories you collect are valuable not necessarily because they represent historical facts, but because they embody human truths — a particular way of looking at the world. As Ann Banks writes in *First Person America*, "The way people make sense of their lives, the web of meaning and identity they weave for themselves, has a significance and importance of its own." The stories people tell, and the cultural traditions they preserve, speak volumes about what they value and how they bring meaning to their lives and to the lives of those around them.

Every interview that you do will be unique. We hope the advice and suggestions offered here will help you on your journey of cultural discovery.

Getting Started

What is the goal of your research? What are you curious about? What do you want to find out? Do you want to learn about a special celebration in your community? Document traditional customs in your family? Find out what it was like when your mother was growing up? The best way to begin is to decide on the focus of your interview. This will determine whom you choose to interview and what sorts of questions you ask. Having a clearly defined goal is key to conducting a successful interview.

Once you've determined the focus of your interview, then what? Whom should you interview first? You might want to begin by thinking about yourself and your own interests. What sorts of questions would you like someone to ask you? What kind of responses do you think they would elicit? This will help you prepare for the interview experience. If possible, try to conduct your first interview with someone with whom you feel very comfortable, such as a close relative or a neighbor you know well. Over the course of the interview, you'll probably pick up clues to other sources: "Aunt Judith can really tell some stories about those days," or "You should ask Antonio Martinez — he's the real master."

What if you don't already know someone to interview about the topic you are interested in? The best way to find people is by asking other people. Chances are you know someone who knows just the person you're looking for! Friends, neighbors, relatives, teachers, librarians, folklorists, and local historians can all help point you in the right direction. Local newspapers, community bulletin boards, and senior citizen centers are also good sources of information.

The interview should take place in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The home of the person you are interviewing is usually the best place, but there may also be other settings that would be appropriate, such as your tradition-bearer's workplace, a church hall, or a community center. Productive

For students and other young interviewers: Remember to always get permission from your parents or guardians to call and/or work with a particular tradition-bearer.

interviews can sometimes take place at regularly occurring events, such as family dinners, holiday celebrations, and work gatherings. These are often the occasions when stories are told and traditional customs observed.

Equipment

An important first step in conducting an interview is to consider the equipment you will need. Tape-recording and note-taking are the most common means of recording folklife and oral history. In most situations, tape-recording is preferable, as it allows you to document your tradition-bearer's stories and experiences completely and accurately, as well as capture the inflections, tone, pauses, and other subtleties of performance.

At first, the people you interview might feel a little uncomfortable with a tape recorder, but after the interview gets going, chances are they'll forget that it is even there! Always keep a pen and paper with you during a tape-recorded interview, so you can note important points or jot down follow-up questions that come to mind while your tradition-bearer is speaking.

A small cassette tape recorder with either a built-in or an external (plug-in) microphone is a good choice. Use high-quality 60- or 90-minute cassettes (tapes that are longer than 45 minutes a side can stretch or break). And always bring more blank tapes with you to an interview than you think you will need, so that you don't get caught short. It's also a good idea to have spare batteries, if your recorder isn't the plug-in type or in case you find yourself in a setting where an electrical outlet is not available. Be sure to check your batteries in advance to make sure they are fresh. Remember to pack an extension cord — it can come in handy.

Practice using the tape recorder before your interview, so that you are familiar with how it works. If you are at ease with your equipment, it will help to put your tradition-bearer at ease too.

Another important piece of equipment is a camera. It allows you to capture a visual record of the person you are interviewing and is especially valuable if you are documenting a process, such as your grandmother stitching a quilt or making a favorite family recipe. A camera, with the addition of a close-up attachment, can also be used to copy old family photographs and other documentary materials, such as letters, birth records, and scrapbooks.

You should take notes on the subject matter, date, and location of your photographs, so that you can prepare a **photo log** for each roll of film you develop.

You may also want to use a video camera to capture a special community event or to visually record a traditional process or a family member recounting his or her life story.

Before the Interview

Get your tradition-bearer's permission for the interview in advance, and schedule a time and place that he or she is comfortable with. Make it clear if you plan to use a tape recorder (see the above discussion of equipment) and ask permission.

Be certain from the start that your tradition-bearer understands the purpose of the interview, and what will happen to the tapes and/or notes afterwards. Is it a school assignment? Are you planning to write a family history? Organize an exhibition? Publish a newsletter about folklife in your area? Are the tapes going to be kept with family scrapbooks? Will they be deposited in a local library, archive, or historical society? Let the person you are interviewing know.

Checklist of Basic Equipment

* *notepads or notebooks*
* *pens/pencils*
* *tape recorder (plug-in microphone, if necessary)*
* *cassette tapes*
* *batteries for tape recorder*
* *extension cord*
* *camera*
* *film*
* *tape measure*
* *interview release form*

See the Forms section for a sample photo log.

Do your homework. It's always a good idea to conduct some background research about the subject you are interested in at the library, on the Internet, or by visiting a museum or archive. Books, pamphlets, photographs, maps, family documents — any or all of these can help give you information on your subject before you go on an interview. Knowing more can help you ask better questions and yields a richer interview.

Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. Make sure they are clear, concise, and open-ended. Avoid questions that elicit simple yes or no answers and steer away from broad generalities. Questions that begin with "How" "What" or "Why" usually elicit a more complete response than questions that begin with "Do" or "Did." For example, "How did you learn your trade?" or "What was it like learning your trade?" instead of "Did you like learning your trade?"

See Some Possible Questions *on page 21.*

Know which questions are key, but don't be tied to your list. The questions are meant simply to help focus and guide the interview.

Structure the interview. Think of the interview as a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Build on your questions and link them together in a logical way.

During the Interview

Take a little time at the beginning to introduce yourself and establish rapport — a feeling of comfort and connectedness — with the person you are interviewing. Discuss the purpose of the interview and describe the nature of your project.

Place the tape recorder within easy reach so that you can change tapes and adjust the controls when necessary, and position the microphone so that you can clearly record both your tradition-bearer's voice and your own.

Mrs. Annie Mason of Franklin County, Mississippi, shows her grandson the family Bible. Photograph by Roland Freeman.

Try to eliminate or minimize any loud background noises, such as the radio or television, that could interfere with the taping. You'd be surprised just how distracting a loud-ticking clock or clattering dishes can be!

Always run a test before you begin an interview. Tape about a minute of conversation and then play it back to make sure you are recording properly and getting the best possible sound. A good procedure is to state your name, your tradition-bearer's name, and the date, location, and topic of the interview. This serves both to test the equipment and to orally "label" the tape. When you are confident that all your equipment is in good working order, you are ready to begin.

Start with a question or a topic that will help put your tradition-bearer at ease. You might want to begin with some basic biographical questions, such as "Where were you born?" "Where did you grow up?" Or perhaps you could ask about a story you once heard him or her tell about the topic you are interested in. These questions are easy to answer and can help break the ice.

Remember to avoid questions that will bring only a yes or no response. And, in order to get as much specific information as possible, be sure to ask follow-up questions: "Could you explain?" "Can you give me an example?" or "How did that happen?"

Show interest and listen carefully to what your tradition-bearer is saying. Keep eye contact and encourage him or her with nods and smiles.

Participate in the conversation without dominating it. Try not to interrupt and don't be afraid of silences — give the person you are interviewing time to think and respond. Be alert to what your tradition-bearer wants to talk about and be prepared to detour from your list of questions if he or she takes up a rich subject you hadn't even thought of!

Make use of visual materials whenever possible. Old photographs, family photo albums, scrapbooks, letters, birth certificates, family Bibles, tools, heirlooms, and mementos help stimulate memories and trigger stories.

Don't turn the tape recorder on and off while the interview is in progress. Not only are you likely to miss important information, but you will give your tradition-bearer the impression that you think some of what he or she is saying isn't worth recording. Never run the recorder without your tradition-bearer's knowledge.

Number each tape as you take it out of the tape recorder so that your tapes don't get mixed up. Later you can add all the other necessary information to the label (see below).

Near the end of the interview, take a quick look over your prepared list of questions to see if you've covered everything you wanted to ask.

Be sensitive to the needs of your tradition-bearer. If he or she is getting tired, stop the interview and schedule another session. Between one and two hours is usually just about the right amount of time for an interview.

After the Interview

Make sure that you get the person you interviewed to sign a **written release** and that you comply with any restrictions that he or she requests. Always ask permission to use the results of the interview in the ways you initially told your tradition-bearer, such as to write a family history or do a school project. Don't make promises you can't keep, and respect confidences and privacy.

See the Forms section for a sample written release.

Label all your tapes and notes with the date, tradition-bearer's name, location of the interview, your name (as the interviewer), project title, and any brief thematic information that might be helpful.

Make notes about the interview while it is still fresh in your mind — jot down impressions, observations, important themes, contextual information, ideas for follow-up.

See the Forms *section for a sample tape log.*

Prepare a **tape log** (topic-by-topic summary) of the contents of the recordings as soon as possible after the interview. You can use the counter on the tape recorder to note the location of each new topic. With this tape log, you will later be able to go back and select portions of the tape to listen to and transcribe (word-for-word translation of the tape-recorded interview). Complete tape transcriptions are important, but they are also very time-consuming. A good compromise is to do a combination of logging and transcribing: log the general contents of the tape and transcribe, word for word, the parts that you think you might want to quote directly.

Store the tapes in a safe place where they are protected from heat, water, and other damage.

Be sure to send a written thank you to your tradition-bearer and, if possible, include a copy of the tape(s).

SOME POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

"I remember my relatives talking and talking,
and yet as a kid, I didn't listen.
I'd love to go back now and listen."
— Wayne Dionne, Alexandria, Virginia

"Folklife is community life and values, artfully expressed in myriad forms and interactions."

— Mary Hufford, Folklorist

Because every individual is unique and every interviewer has his or her own special interests and research goals, there is no single set of questions that will fit every situation. The following are some that might help guide an interview with a relative or community member about family folklore and local traditions. Pick and choose among them to suit your own interests, and change the wording as you see fit. Ultimately, the most useful questions will be those that you develop yourself based on your knowledge of your own family and/or community. Remember not to be tied to a formal list of questions; rather use your questions as guideposts for the interview. Be flexible and have fun!

Biographical Questions

Q: What is your name? Where and when were you born? Where did you grow up? Where have you lived? What jobs have you had? What do you do for a living now?

Family Folklore

Q: What do you know about your family name? Are there stories about its history or origins? Has it undergone any changes? Are there any stories about those changes? Are there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family? What are they? How did they come about? Are there any naming traditions? What are they?

Q: Do you know any stories about how your family first came to the United States? Where did they first settle? Why? How did they make a living? Did your family stay in one place or move around? How did they come to live in this area?

Q: If your tradition-bearer is a first-generation immigrant, you might ask him or her: Why did you leave to come to the United States? What possessions did you bring with you and why? What was the journey like? Which family members came along or stayed behind? What were some of your first impressions and early experiences in this country? What traditions or customs have you made an effort to preserve? Why? Are there traditions that you have given up or changed? Why?

Q: What languages do you speak? Do you speak a different language in different settings, such as home, school, or work? Are there any expressions, jokes, stories, celebrations where a certain language is always used? Can you give some examples?

Q: What stories have come down to you about your parents and grandparents? More distant ancestors? (If you are interviewing your grandparents, ask them to tell you stories about what your parents were like when they were young!)

Q: Do you know any courtship stories? How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet and marry?

Q: What are some of your childhood memories? What games did you play when you were a child? Did you sing verses when you played games? What were they? What kinds of toys did you play with? Who made them? Did you make any yourself? How did you make them? What kinds of materials did you use? What kind of home entertainment was there? Was there storytelling? Music? Were there craft traditions? Describe these traditions.

Q: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?

Q: How are holidays traditionally celebrated in your family? What holidays are the most important? Are there special family traditions, customs, songs, foods? Has your family created its own traditions and celebrations? What are they? How did they come about?

Wangsheng Li interviews Dr. Wang Yu Cheng about Chinese herbal medicine in his store in New York City. Photo by Wangsheng Li, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Q: What special foodways traditions does your family have? Have any recipes been preserved and passed down in your family from generation to generation? What are they? What are their origins? Have they changed over the years? How? Have any of the ingredients been adapted or changed? Why? Are there certain foods that are traditionally prepared for holidays and celebrations? Who makes them? Are there family stories connected to the preparation of special foods?

Q: Does your family hold reunions? When? Where? Who attends? How long have the reunions been going on? What activities take place? Are awards given out? Is there a central figure who is honored? Why? What sorts of stories are told at these events?

Q: What family heirlooms or keepsakes and mementos do you possess? Why are they valuable to you? What is their history? How were they handed down? Are there any memories or stories connected with them?

Q: Do you have any photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies? Who made them? When? Can you describe/explain their contents? Who is pictured? What activities and events are documented?

Local History and Community Life

Q: Describe the place — urban neighborhood, small town, rural community, suburb — where you grew up. What was it like? How has it changed over the years? What brought about these changes? What did people do for a living? What do they do now?

Q: Can you draw a map of your local community? Of your neighborhood? Your family home? Your farmstead? What places stand out most in your mind and why? What are/were your neighbors like? What kinds of local gatherings and events are there? What stories and memories come to mind?

Q: What community traditions are celebrated today? Church suppers? Chinese New Year parades? Saint's day processions? Cinco de Mayo celebrations? What are they like? How long have they been going on? How have they changed? Who is involved? Why are they important to the community?

Q: How have historical events affected your family and community? For example, what were some of your experiences during World War II, the Civil Rights Movement?

Cultural Traditions/Occupational Skills

Q: How did you first get started with this particular tradition/skill? What got you interested?

Q: How did you learn your skills? Who taught you? When? What was the learning process like? What is the most challenging or difficult aspect of the tradition to learn? Why?

Q: What are the key characteristics of the tradition? What is its history? Do you know how and where the tradition originated? How has it traditionally been practiced? How has it changed or developed over time?

Q: Does the tradition have different styles or variations? What are they?

Q: Describe the steps of the process from start to finish. What's involved?

Q: What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?

Q: What raw materials are used? Where do you get your materials/supplies/ingredients? How are they prepared? Have they changed over time? How? Why?

Q: What tools are involved? How and when are they used?

Q: How do you judge excellence within the tradition? What standards and criteria are used to evaluate the way the tradition is performed? What makes someone respected in the tradition?

Q: In what context is the skill/tradition performed? For whom? When?

Q: What do you value most about what you do? Why?

Q: What do you think is the future of this tradition? What are its challenges and opportunities? Are others learning and practicing the tradition?

PRESENTING YOUR FINDINGS

"In the presence of grandparent and grandchild,
past and future merge in the present."
— Margaret Mead

Now that you have interviewed members of your family or local community about folklore and oral history, how can you share the information and materials you have collected? There are a number of ways to preserve and present your findings. You may simply want to index and/or transcribe your tape-recorded interviews and store your materials in a safe place where you and other members of your family or community can have easy access to them, such as a local archive, school library, historical society, or community organization. Or you might want to organize and share your information with others by writing a family history, organizing an exhibition, compiling a family or community recipe book, making a memory quilt, publishing a newsletter or magazine, or producing a video documentary or radio show.

Featured on the next few pages are several ways to present family folklore and community traditions. We hope that they help to give you some ideas about how you might share your own materials.

Compile a Family or Community Recipe Book

If you have interviewed your relatives or members of your local community about favorite recipes that have been passed down through the generations, compile a cookbook with the recipes you've collected. Find out information about the ingredients that are used and how and why they may have changed over time and place. Include memories and stories about the cooks and the recipes, and descriptions of the celebrations, rituals, and traditions that are associated with the preparation of these special foods. A good example is *Mamoo's Soggy Coconut Cake*, a family recipe book compiled by the Lewis family of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Frances Hurley documents her mother, Mrs. T. A. "Mamoo" Lewis, making the family's favorite soggy coconut cake. Photograph by Harlan Hambright.

Mamoo's Soggy Coconut Cake

Mrs. T. A. Lewis of Knoxville, Tennessee, affectionately known as "Mamoo," was celebrated among family and friends for her inimitable soggy coconut cake. "Christmas is not Christmas without Mamoo's coconut cake," said her granddaughter Faye. "That's the way it's been for years and years, as long as I can remember." When Mamoo was 95, her family decided to document her as she made the cake. With a tape recorder, a camera, and plenty of questions, they followed her through the entire process from the selection of a suitable coconut to the presentation of the finished product. Far more than a recipe was recorded. Her family also captured on tape and on film the cherished recollections, stories, traditions, values, and attitudes associated with making the cake. Afterwards, they transcribed the tapes, edited the materials, and printed a 43-page booklet — illustrated with photographs of Mamoo preparing her specialty — which they distributed to relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Family photos can evoke memories and trigger stories. Photograph courtesy of Marjorie Hunt.

"Abediah — A Family Saying"

"My grandfather grew up on a farm in Missouri in the Ozarks. There used to be a lot of traveling salesmen and peddlers back then, and there was this one man named Abediah who sold pots and pans and things like that. He would come through about once every six months and my great-grandmother would always invite him in for dinner. Abediah liked to talk an incredible amount. He would talk forever and interrupt everyone at the table, and so the expression came about in my family that whenever you interrupt anyone, everyone calls out "Abediah!"

— Marjorie Hunt, Washington, D.C.

Hispanic rancher and weaver Agueda Martinez was an invaluable cultural resource, not only for the weaving skills that she had perfected over a lifetime, but for her mastery of the arts of life — of cooking, canning, ranching, raising children, planning weddings, making adobe bricks, leading town meetings, and much more. Photograph by Barbaraellen Koch, courtesy of the Albuquerque Journal.

Create an Exhibition

Create an exhibition based on your interviews and research. Perhaps you have photographs, keepsakes, copies of old documents, tools, art work, and other visual materials that you could organize and display. Determine the important themes you would like to address, select photographs and/or objects that illustrate your themes, identify pithy quotes from your interviews that capture key ideas and experiences, then write interpretive labels and put together photo/text panels that present the information you discovered.

A fun exhibition project is to assemble a cultural treasure chest. Fill a small chest or trunk with family mementos and keepsakes that hold special meaning and express a sense of cultural identity and roots. Write a short label for each artifact that captures the meaning it holds and the memories and stories it evokes. Have fun "unpacking" the treasure chest — at home, in school, or at a community center — and artfully displaying the cultural treasures with their accompanying labels. A "docent" can give an exhibition tour of the treasures, commenting on the significance of the artifacts and the history and heritage they convey. You can expand on the project by producing an exhibition catalog that includes photographs of the objects and essays that go into more detail about the significance of each piece.

Directions for making a Heritage Box are available on the Latin American Youth Center's web site at: www.layc-dc.org

Another great idea for an exhibition project is to make a Heritage Box. Young people from the Latin American Youth Center in Washington, D.C., interviewed members of their community and then put together Heritage Boxes that were compilations of artifacts, stories, quotes, and pictures that gave insights into a particular person's life and heritage. The boxes can be made of wood, cardboard, or any available material. The dimensions should be about 18˝ x 24˝ to allow enough room for display. Turn the box on its side and carefully arrange the text, artifacts, and pictures in the box so that they tell a story. Display all the boxes together for a wonderful "group portrait" of a community.

Helen Fretz Jarrett of Washington, D.C., assembled this "treasure chest" of family mementos as a gift for her grandson on his eleventh birthday. Photo by Eric Lang, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Make a Family Scrapbook

Put together a scrapbook filled with keepsakes, mementos, old photographs, drawings, reminiscences, and other items that embody and preserve your family heritage. The following excerpts from an essay by renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead provide valuable suggestions for how to make this a memorable intergenerational project:

Making a Grandparent Book
by Margaret Mead

"Making grandparent books is a way for grandparents to pass on to their grandchildren their most cherished possessions — their memories of their own childhood and youth."
— Margaret Mead

We as parents have an important part to play in linking together past and present for children.... Our children will want to know more intimately about the lives of people who are real and very close to them — how they lived and what they looked like and what they made of the world around them. These, I think, are pictures of the past only we can assemble for our own children.

How can we do this?

One of the best ways, it seems to me, is by making "grandmother and grandfather books" — scrapbooks or albums that will reflect a family's own history as far back as the oldest member can recall. The whole family can join in gathering the material, and the books as they take form will be full of surprises and discoveries for everyone.

There isn't a fixed form for a grandparent book. A bride's book or a baby book can provide a kind of model, but your family will have to invent a form to fit all the kinds of things you decide are part of the family story. A big loose-leaf binder and a large supply of strong paper might be good to start with, for memories, once stirred, tend to rustle on and on; and desk drawers, attic trunks, and boxes in the cellar, once opened, spew forth old daguerreotypes, snapshots, wedding pictures, and photographs of Grandfather as a little boy riding a studio bucking bronco or of Great-grandmother as a little girl in long skirts and button boots.

The first sessions had better take place around the biggest table in the house, where everyone can see the evidence assembled — the family Bible with its record of births and deaths, the old marriage lines, the faded passports that meant freedom and a new life for one set of great-grandparents, the old address books that tell where everyone lived a generation ago, the tags still attached to old luggage, the letters from relatives who moved away across the continent.

Grandparents can be asked to think back, to hunt out and to recall everything they know about their grandparents, so that their grandchildren can hear what they heard. Once when we were studying children's ideas about time, a little boy said that for him "long ago" was before his grandfather's grandfather's time. His own grandfather, he explained, told him the stories that his grandfather had told him about his boyhood. So real and lively were these tales that the boy today felt that he could reach out with his own hand and touch that distant time four generations ago.

If your family has a small tape recorder, or can borrow one, you can make a record of just how one story led to another....

There will be many different kinds of things to put into the books. Old dance programs with tiny pencils attached by silk cords to write in the names of partners, a blue ribbon won as a prize at a county fair and souvenir post cards brought home from world's fairs, the lace collar that adorned Grandmother's first dancing dress, a bit of tattered shawl carefully laid away by a great-aunt, Father's first report cards, which Grandpa secretly kept, and Grandma's precious recipe for plum pudding, written out in her mother's spidery handwriting, lacy valentines, the front page from the "extra" hawked by newsboys on Armistice Day, 1918, a pressed white rose from a wedding bouquet — all these have their stories to tell.

Some books will need a lot of pages for the already well-remembered past, in case some grandmother or great-grandfather kept the family tree well in mind and made records or kept a diary about events in the lives of relatives. In some few families there may be a straight line of eight, or even nine, generations back to the Revolutionary War....

For other families, life in America began only yesterday. Grandmother came here as a young girl to find work or to visit relatives, and stayed to marry. "She and Grandfather came over on the same boat, but they only met 10 years later." For these families there are the ties to European, Middle Eastern, or Far Eastern towns — old letters in foreign languages, photographs of great-aunts and uncles and cousins who stayed in the Old Country.

There will be gaps, of course, and many families today know little that is personal about their particular ancestors. But grandparents will be able to name the little town in the Carpathians or the tiny island off the coast of Scotland from which, it is said, their parents or grandparents came.

Family celebrations, such as the Passover Seder, are often a time when special foodways are prepared, traditional customs observed, and family stories told. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

And never mind if the legends about them are romanticized, so that ancestors from Wales had a castle in the family and remote Irish ancestors were kings and queens and a slave ancestor was known to all his descendants as a proud rebel who won his own freedom.... Family legends are as much a part of our history as the true events out of which they grew and the real people around whom we have built our romances about the past.... If there are family movies — and many families have some stowed away — still photographs can be made from these that show wedding scenes and family reunions and picnics and children, who are now staid, middle-aged adults, turning somersaults on the lawn.

Grumpy uncles and critical aunts will seem more human when Grandma tells stories about their childhood, when they stole corn or watermelons or threw the winter wood down the well or ran away and thumbed a ride home in an empty hearse. Children will be comforted to know their fathers and mothers sometimes made poor grades in school or played hooky or cut their hair with the nail scissors. No one whose mischief and sad experiences and triumphs can be shared by the children can remain just a name or a stranger — of no matter how long ago — because children too have been mischievous and sad and triumphant from time to time.

And history itself will come alive. You can make up a chart of memorable historical dates and in between these set down the dates when grandparents — and you, the parents of your children — were born, met, and married. History won't seem so distant and unreal for the child who can say that Grandma was 10 years old when in 1927 Lindbergh flew the Atlantic, that Grandpa was just 15 that day in March, 1934, when all the banks were closed, and that a great-aunt, just out of college, was sitting in a dentist's chair when she saw what looked like snowflakes — in full summer — drifting pat the window. Of course, they were really the bits of paper people were tearing up and throwing from windows to welcome V-J Day in 1945.

So history will reach from a grandfather to his grandfather, from a grandmother to her grandmother, and from grandparents to their grandchildren....

From "Interview with Santa Claus" by Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux

Ellen Jumbo, a West Coast Indian basketweaver from Vancouver Island, Canada, weaves a basket as a young relative looks on. Photo by Ulli Steltzer, from Indian Artists at Work.

More Project Ideas

Make a community or family memory quilt. Piece together appliqued quilt squares that capture the memories, stories, and experiences that you documented in your interviews. For a school project, each student in the class could contribute an applique square that represents an important aspect of his/her family heritage or the cultural traditions of his/her community. Other related project ideas: paint a collective mural of neighborhood life or make an illustrated family tree annotated with stories and reminiscences about different family members.

Write an essay or compose a song based on the information you have gathered from your interviews. A great example is the Smithsonian Folkways recording, *Here I Stand: Elders' Wisdom, Children's Song*. For this project, Larry Long and students from several small rural public schools in Alabama interviewed local elders about their lives and composed songs based on the elders' stories and experiences.

A GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Glossary

Anecdote — *a short narrative about an interesting, amusing, or curious incident, often biographical and based on a real event*

Archive — *a place where documents, letters, diaries, photos, recordings, and other information are stored and can be used by researchers with special permission*

Community — *any group of people sharing a common identity based on family, occupation, region, religion, culture, gender, age, interest, or avocation; where you live, go to school, work, worship, have family; people may be part of many overlapping communities, including their neighborhood, church, school, clubs, service organizations, or peer groups.*

Culture — *a people's ways of being, knowing, and doing*

Custom — *a usage or practice that is common to a group of people or to a particular place*

Docent — *a person who conducts guided tours through a museum and discusses and comments on the exhibits*

Ethnography — *the process of documenting a group's cultural traditions*

Family Folklore — *the stories, traditions, customs, rituals, sayings, expressions, celebrations, nicknames, foodways, games, and photographs that are preserved and passed on within a family*

Fieldwork — *documentation of cultural expressions and ways of life conducted in the social and cultural contexts in which they take place; the gathering of anthropological or sociological data through first-hand observation and interviewing of subjects in the field*

Folklore/Folklife — *the traditional expressive culture shared within various groups: familial, occupational, religious, and regional. Expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, occupational skill, foodways, language, drama, ritual, music, narrative, play, craft, dance, drama, art, and architecture. Generally these expressions are learned orally, by imitation, or in performance.*

Folklorist — *someone who studies how people's expressive traditions — their stories, customs, art, skills, beliefs, music, and other expressions — are created, shaped, and made meaningful in community life. Folklorists conduct much of their research by observing and interviewing people "in the field."*

Genre — *a category of expression (art, oral tradition, literature) distinguished by a definite style, form, or content, such as folktales, legends, proverbs, ballads, or myths*

Heritage — *something of value or importance passed down by or acquired from a predecessor; recognized cultural identity and roots*

Indigenous — *originating and developing naturally in a particular land, region, or environment*

Legend — *a narrative supposedly based on fact, and told as true, about a person, place, or incident*

Oral History — *a process of collecting, usually by means of a tape-recorded interview, recollections, accounts, and personal experience narratives of individuals for the purpose of expanding the historical record of a place, event, person, or cultural group*

Personal Experience Narrative — *first-person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives*

Rapport — *a feeling of comfort and connectedness between people*

Tape Log — *a topic-by-topic summary of the contents of a tape recording*

Tradition — *knowledge, beliefs, customs, and practices that have been handed down from person to person by word of mouth or by example, for instance, the practice of always having a certain meal for a holiday*

Tradition-Bearer — *a person who has knowledge, skills, and experience to share, for example someone who learned to quilt or cook from a family member or someone who has been farming for many years*

Transcribe — *taking down the contents of a tape recording, word for word*

TO LEARN MORE

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Internet Resources

Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students (CARTS)
www.carts.org

Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
Cultural Education Resources/Materials/Programs
www.folklife.si.edu

Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
www.folkways.si.edu

Smithsonian Institution Center for Education and Museum Studies
www.smithsonianeducation.org

The Library of Congress American Folklife Center
Veterans History Project
www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/

Southern Oral History Program
"Designing an Oral History Project"
www.unc.edu/depts/soph/guide.html

Baylor University Institute for Oral History
"Oral History Workshop on the Web"
www.baylor.edu/oral_History/family.html

American Folklore Society
www.afs.org

American Association of State and Local History
www.aaslh.org

The National Genealogical Society
www.ngsgenealogy.org/main/body_frame.html

SAMPLE FORMS

INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM

Project name: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Tape number: _____

Name of person(s) interviewed: _____

Address: _____

Telephone number: _____

Date of birth: _____

By signing the form below, you give your permission for any tapes and/or photographs made during this project to be used by researchers and the public for educational purposes including publications, exhibitions, World Wide Web, and presentations. By giving your permission, you do not give up any copyright or performance rights that you may hold.

I agree to the uses of these materials described above, except for any restrictions, noted below.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Restriction description: _____

INTERVIEW INFORMATION FORM

Full name of person interviewed: _____

Nickname, if any: _____

Date of interview: _____

Researcher's name: _____

Address of person interviewed: _____

_____

Telephone number: _____

Email: _____

Date of birth: _____ Place of birth: _____

Cultural background: _____

How many years living in this community? _____

_____

Where else lived? _____

_____

Spouses and children's names (if any): _____

_____

Occupation: _____

_____

Skills and activities: _____

_____

_____

Education: _____

_____

Hobbies, interests: _____

_____

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Other information: _____

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INTERVIEW CONTEXT

Where the interview took place: _____

Time of day: _____

Sound conditions (background noise):

_____

_____

Other people present: _____

_____

Notes about the interview (key themes, points of discussion):

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Other documentation (tapes, photos, newspaper articles, etc.):

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TAPE LOG

Name of person(s) interviewed: _____

Other people present: _____

Researcher: _____

Date of interview: _____

Location of interview: _____

Special conditions (noise, interruptions, etc.):

_____

General description of contents: _____

_____

_____

Tape number: _____

Page _____ of _____

TOPIC SUMMARY

Provide the tape counter number and as much content information as possible.

Counter No.	Contents

TAPE LOG CONTINUED

Cassette No: _____

Counter No.	Contents

PHOTO LOG

Person(s)/Subject(s) photographed: _____

Photographer: _____

Date(s) taken: _____

Location(s): _____

Type of film: _____

Photo conditions (light, weather, etc.): _____

General description of contents: _____

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Other information available (Interview Information Form, Tape Log, Field Notes, etc.):

_____

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Page _____ of _____

Photo Frame No.	Description of Contents

CULTURAL MARKER EXERCISE

This is an excellent exercise for students and teachers, senior centers, families, and other community groups to get individuals thinking about their own cultural heritage and to gain respect and understanding for the cultural identity and heritage of others.

Purpose:

To identify and report on an item (object, photo) that serves an important role in your own cultural (ethnic, family, regional) identity.

Assignment:

Think about an object or photo that you feel helps define who you are and/or where you are from. Write at least one page about the item's significance. (For instance, think of a family heirloom — a photograph of your grandparents, an old tool used by your father, a piece of lace from a wedding gown — that speaks to your family's roots. How does this item help explain your life and culture?) Be prepared to give a three-minute presentation about this item (to your class, your extended family, a senior center gathering). Plan to bring the item with you if possible. Take three minutes to present your cultural marker to the group. Then engage in an exercise where participants break into pairs and take turns interviewing one another, using the cultural markers as points of departure.

Homework:

Review the information you collected from your interview. Think about how you might improve your interviewing skills. Refer to the *Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* for advice and suggestions.

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The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide is available on-line at: www.folklife.si.edu

"[Tradition-bearers] are living links in the historical chain, eye witnesses to history, shapers of a vital and indigenous way of life. They are unparalleled in the vividness and authenticity they can bring to the study of local history and culture."

— Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Folklorist

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