

Turning On the Memory Tap

Karen Dustman offers some tips to help get the memories flowing when interviewing family members

Ahh, summer. These carefree months are a great time to gather more family history! Wangle a memory or two from Aunt Harriet over iced tea at that summer picnic. Keep your ears open for fresh bits of family history as you meet relatives at a reunion. And be sure to bring your notebook if you're headed on a trip to visit far-away family you don't often see – they might have not only stories you've never heard before, but precious old family photos, too.

If you're lucky enough to sit down with a family member for a family history interview, it's easy to start with a few basic questions. The common ones, of course, you already know: What's the person's full name, date of birth, where they were born, who were their parents. All great background material, of course. And they help break the ice.

But how do you get someone to add a bit more meat to the story? And what do you do when a family member turns out to be the "shy and retiring" type? You know that awkward moment: a one-word answer, a sweet smile, and they look over at you expectantly. Now what??

Here are a few helpful tips to help get (and keep!) those family history memories flowing.



Even the "oopses" in life make great family history tales. (From the author's collection)



A simple photo like this can prompt a great story. What was on television, back in the day? (Family photo from the author's collection)

Use Photo Prompts:

For story-prompting power, there's nothing with quite as much voltage as an old photo. Pictures can unlock vivid memories of time and place – and unleash a flood of stories. Bring a photo of your family with you or, better yet, ask the family member you're interviewing if they have an album or a box of old photos you can go through together.

One especially helpful tip: ask your interview subject to pick out a picture they especially like. What's special to them about the photo? What's the story behind it? And remember, there may be more than one! A single, tattered photo of the old family homestead might prompt tales about the patriarch who originally built the house, the bootleg whiskey Grandpa kept in the basement, and the time Cousin Helen's long dress caught fire in the kitchen.

Magazines as Memory-Joggers

I love passing around old magazines in my memoir classes. The room always seems to erupt in laughter and stories as students flip through the pages. Sometimes it's even hard to get them to let go and pass the magazine along to the next student!

Whether it's a 1960s hunting magazine or a 1930s women's



Old advertisements for home remedies and beauty products are great reminders of the “way things were”. (From author’s collection)

Sample Questions

- What was the first job for which you actually got paid?
- What was the most adventuresome or foolhardy thing you ever did?
- Was there a special turning point that shaped your life?
- What was your biggest disappointment as a child?
- What accomplishment are you most proud of? Why?

fashion periodical, there’s always something in those pages to bring memories to mind. And visuals from an old magazine – especially old ads and clothing illustrations – can be a great help to put your oral history subject in a talkative frame of mind. Thanks to eBay and other online sellers, a wide variety of vintage magazines are now just a few clicks away.

If you’ll be interviewing a relative born in the 1930s, consider bringing a magazine from the 1940s or ‘50s with you.



Fashions change – and so do the prices! (From the author’s collection)

What memories do they have of dressing up for a special event as a teen or young adult? What were the fashion expectations of the day? Let them thumb through the issue and see what images bring a sparkle to their eyes – quite often, a story will follow.

Ask for a Drawing

One technique I especially love for getting stories to flow is simply putting a pen in my subject’s hand. “Draw me a picture of the street where you grew up” is a great conversation-starter. And a hand-drawn map makes a great addition to any oral history. Who were the nearby neighbors they most remember? What were the main streets of town? Who lived there? And where was the school, the grocery store, and that fabulous swimming hole?

Each one of the places on that map, of course, can prompt its own story. How kids played tricks on the curmudgeon next door. The time the politicians wanted to tear down the beloved old railroad station and the entire town turned out in arms to stop it. That summer day when a beloved friend

nearly drowned. A favorite teacher who went off to war and never returned.

One Small Closing Caution

The best interviewers know that listening truly is an art. Be careful not to “step on” stories once they begin to flow. If someone seems to be veering off subject, don’t jump in instantly to redirect the conversation. It’s possible that the story they’re about to tell you will be even more fascinating than the one they first began.

The best tip of all: Your own enthusiasm will be contagious. Don’t hesitate to let the person you’re interviewing know you truly enjoy hearing their memories and appreciate their willingness to share family history.



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