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Interviewing Mom and Grandma: Oral History Tips

by [Sharon DeBartolo Carmack](#)

Looking for a great gift for Mom or Grandma for Mother's Day, a birthday, Christmas, or some other occasion? Why not take an hour or so to interview the women in your family and preserve their life stories? Women typically lead private lives. Unlike men who usually create tons of records, even today some women don't create many public documents, so capturing their life story is all the more crucial.

Interviewing for Life Story Content

When I was just a baby genealogist, I dutifully interviewed my grandmother, asking her questions like when and where she was born, the names of her parents, when and where they were born, the names and birth dates of her siblings, the names of her grandparents and when and where they were born and died. Then, as all the genealogy how-to books advised, I verified everything she told me in one record or another.

I hated doing oral history interviews. My grandmother hated being interviewed. It didn't take me long to realize that interviewing the women in my family for genealogical information wasn't a pleasant experience for anyone. So I stopped interviewing them. What was the point? Why bother asking questions if I could find the information in a record somewhere anyway?

Then I met a social historian who taught me a better way of doing oral history interviewing—the oral historian's way. Instead of asking *who*, *where*, and *when*, I should be asking these women *why*, *how*, and *what*.

- What was your wedding day like?
- How did your mother prepare you for the wedding night?
- What were some of your mother's positive qualities?
- What about negative qualities?
- How did your mother meet your father?
- What is your fondest memory of your mother or your grandmother?
- As you think of your mother or grandmother, how do you remember her looking?
- How old was she then?
- What did you call her?
- What did others call her?
- Tell me a story about your mother or grandmother that would characterize her or show me what kind of a woman she was.

None of these questions can be answered with just a simple "yes" or "no." These questions require the person to think about the answers and will give you information you won't find in any records. Information that is so much more interesting than dry names and dates.

Your Interview Goals

The first question you need to ask — yourself — is "What is the purpose of conducting an oral history interview with the women in my family?" Is your goal to "get the facts, ma'am, nothin' but the facts"? Or is it to learn about what life was like for her? We do have to start with the basic facts — the *who*, *when*, and *where* for our genealogical searches; but keep in mind that you'll probably find all of that information in a record somewhere once you begin research. What you won't find in the records are your moms's thoughts, feelings, and motivations — the *why*, *how*, and *what*. These are the things that make a person unique and will go to the grave when she dies.

Preparing for the Interview

Always prepare before an interview with questions you'd like to ask, remembering to seek *why* did this happen, *how* did you feel about it, and *what* was it like? My favorite book for oral history prep is William Fletcher's *Recording Your Family History*. He subdivides questions into these categories:

- Family history
- Childhood

- Youth
- Middle age
- Old age
- Narrator as parent
- Grandchildren
- Historical events
- General questions, unusual life experiences, and personal philosophy and values
- Questions for interviewing Jewish, black, and Hispanic relatives

I use the questions Fletcher provides as a starting point, then tailor the questions to the woman I'm interviewing based on my prior knowledge about her life. I write these questions out in advance, but I'm prepared to deviate if she gives me details about a topic I hadn't considered.

Interviewing Etiquette and Putting Your Victim at Ease

Before I actually begin the interview, I explain to the subject that not all the material will be used in the family history I write and that they will have an opportunity to see and approve what I write before it is published or distributed to other family members. Keep in mind that you do not own that person's memories; therefore, you may not use the information a relative tells you at your own discretion. Get written permission to use the material if you plan to publish or distribute parts of the interview.

I also try to put my interview victims at ease by telling them that they do not have to answer all the questions I ask. If it's too personal, just tell me. And if they later regret telling me something, they can let me know and I won't include it.

My aunt was one of those reluctant interviewees. She dreaded coming for a visit because she knew I wanted to interview her. By the second day, however, she was loving the attention. Usually, once the reluctant narrator sees that I'm not asking for facts — especially about people long dead and buried — but instead stories about her life and her memories of her parents and grandparents, the victim relaxes and thoroughly enjoys the experience.

An interview should not last longer than one to two hours at a stretch. It's tiring for you and the person being interviewed. If you are only with the relative for a day or so, take frequent breaks during the interview, since an intensive interview like this can last from six to eight hours at a stretch.

As you are conducting the interview, listen. Ask a question, then wait and listen to the response. While the urge to interrupt — to clarify a point or ask another question — is great, don't. Make a note of the item and come back to it. Do not interrupt or correct the narrator. Even though you may have documented proof that contradicts a story you are being told, let your relative tell you the way she remembers the event. You can make a note of the discrepancy. Show interest in what she is saying by nodding, using appropriate facial expressions, or occasionally saying "uh-huh."

Getting Personal

To me, some of the best questions are the personal ones — ones that may be slightly embarrassing or may make the narrator laugh or cry. These are the questions no one has had the nerve to ask, and the answers to which you won't find recorded anywhere, except maybe in a diary. Obviously, you don't want to start the interview with a question like "So tell me what you and your husband used for birth control in the 1940s." Or, "Tell me about the automobile accident your son died in last year."

Using Oral History

So what do you do with the interview after you've picked your mom's or grandma's brain? You will either need to transcribe the tapes or, if you did not take notes during the interview, you should make notes from the tapes. Keep in mind that if you leave the interview as an audio or video tape, it will not be as useful to you or your descendants. Technology changes too fast, and the shelf life of an audio or video tape is only about ten years before it will begin to deteriorate. The printed word is still the most widely used form of preserving history.

Be aware that transcribing tapes is incredibly time consuming and tedious. Personally, I have never transcribed an oral history tape; I prefer to make notes from the tape and pull particularly interesting quotes to use when writing the family history.

Once you have the interview transcribed, there are many ways you can incorporate the details into your family history. Some people like to include transcriptions of interviews in their family books while

others prefer to include a more narrative account. You could also incorporate details of the interview when writing captions to photographs in your scrapbook.

Oral History Interviewing *Is Fun for Everyone Involved*

Despite my rocky start as an oral history interviewer, I have come to really enjoy it. And so have the women I've interviewed. It's wonderful to have someone interested in you and your life, and it's cathartic for them to relax, reminisce, and reflect on their past. With oral history interviewing, you can ensure that women in your family will have their lives recorded and remembered forever.

Suggested Reading

Epstein, Ellen and Jane Lewit. *Record and Remember: Tracing Your Roots through Oral History*. Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1994

Fletcher, William. *Recording Your Family History: A Guide to Preserving Oral History Using Audio and Video Tape*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1989.

Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History*. Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000.

About the Author

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack is a Certified Genealogist, editor of Betterway Genealogy Books, contributing editor for *Family Tree Magazine*, and the author of eight books, including *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestors*. Sharon also teaches [online courses](#) in personal/family memoir writing.

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