

What Do You Know About Your Mother's First Date?

Do you know how Grandma and Grandpa met? What do you know about your mother's first date? How did your father feel about being a teenager? These are questions that you may never know the answers to unless you ask.

The best place to start your family history is with the people who are still alive. Amazing, isn't it? You don't have to begin by doing hard-core research. This is not rocket science; it's just talking to your family. Most people have a wealth of information about their own lives, and they usually know at least something about their parents and brothers and sisters. What they know just might help you uncover some fascinating facts and heartwarming stories.

Interview with My Dad

On the 24th of July, between the Pioneer Day parade and the evening fireworks, I interviewed my dad. I asked him questions that brought back many memories and recorded priceless moments from his life. My mom and I laughed out loud as he told about making a secret tunnel in a straw pile, as a boy, with a little den at the end. He said, "I put some boards around so it wouldn't fall in on me and I kept my gum and lifesavers in there on a shelf." He always did have a sweet tooth!

We understood more about dad's great love for Christmas when he described the excited feelings it gave him as a child. His eternal optimism must have started early in life; he never did give up hope of finding the pony of his dreams on Christmas morning with "a white bally face, four stocking legs, and a flax mane and tail—a perfect little horse."

Something in our discussion reminded Dad of how baling wire was the all-purpose solution of yesteryear; the same as duct tape is today. He never said much about his experiences in the Naval Air Corp during WWII, but the memory of baling wire prompted him to tell a hair-raising war story. He and his crew used baling wire to hold a vital cable in place after their plane had been shot full of holes. The baling wire held long enough for the plane to land in the ocean, after which two boats pulled up to rescue the crew moments before the plane sank. I gave thanks that his life was preserved so that his posterity, including me, could come to earth and be part of the family that I love.

Three months after our interview, my dad made an unexpected exit from this mortal life. We wished him well as he went on to his next assignment, and began to feel how the absence of his light left our world a little dimmer. When the family asked me to speak at the funeral, I was delighted that I could tell stories from his life—in his own words! By that time, I had almost finished a small book about him, complete with pictures, and I presented copies to my family at Christmas. They were thrilled and I was, too, because I was able to capture his story before it was too late.

Why Interview?

You can feel the same emotions stirring in your heart by discovering your family's memories. However, some approaches work better than others. We have heard this story dozens of times: "I gave my mom a book to write her story in, but she never did it." You are lucky if that strategy has worked for you. A better idea is to ask questions—one-on-one. For your first interview pick someone that you are comfortable with, such as a grandparent or sibling, to be your storyteller. Make sure that person is agreeable to the idea and then start getting ready. (*See the tips in the sidebar.*)

What to Ask

There are lots of places where you can find interview questions (on the Internet, at bookstores, through church resources), or you can make up your own. Be sure to pick questions that will trigger memories, not yes or no answers. Here are some examples:

- What were some of your father's characteristics?
- Describe your first date.
- What was your first job for pay and what was it like?
- Tell me about a time when you were very ill.
- Describe a funny family memory.
- Tell me about a spiritual or inspirational experience you have had.

Start with a Timeline

One of the best ways to prepare for an interview is to build a timeline of the storyteller's life. To do this, simply make a column listing every year of his or her life. Next to each year, list the storyteller's age, beginning with zero. Next to each age, list the significant events that happened and make a note of where he or she lived.

Creating a timeline helps you avoid putting someone on the spot during an interview. Older people, especially, tend to panic when they can't remember when or where something happened. You want your interviews to go as smoothly as possible!

Try building a timeline of your own life and you will quickly see what a valuable tool this is. When you are finished, the timeline can help you remember things like what year you were married, where your kids were born, and when you changed jobs.

Conducting the Interview

Once you have selected your questions and gathered some background information, you are ready to interview. How you go about this depends on your objective and what both you and the storyteller are willing to do. The most desirable method is recording the interview, but some people are reluctant to talk on tape or, worse yet, star in their own video. If all you can do is write down what the storyteller has to say, even that is a priceless treasure.

With the tools that are available to us today, recording a history is relatively simple. Use a cassette or video recorder to capture every one of the storyteller's words. After recording an interview, transcribe (type up) the tape yourself or hire someone else to do it. It takes a professional about two times as long to transcribe the length of tape they are listening to, so be prepared to do some work or spend some money.

Whatever you decide to do, it will be more than worth the effort. In fact, it's addictive! Have fun and share the wealth with your family and friends.

Jenni Johnson is a co-author of the *Capture the Memories* series of interview books.

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING (Sidebar)

Set the Stage

Before an interview, you may want to ask the storyteller to gather important information such as the birth dates and places of their parents and siblings, dates and locations of places they lived, or the names of schools they have attended. Old photos and documents can also help jog the storyteller's memory.

Do Some Homework

Jot down what you know about the storyteller's family—names of relatives, family structure, and history—or items of special interest that you want to ask questions about. **Prepare Your Tools**

Make sure you have everything you need for the interview so that it goes as smoothly as possible. Your checklist might include the interview questions, something to write on, extra pens or pencils, a working cassette or video recorder, extra tapes, and batteries.

Be Sensitive

Sensitive issues, such as divorces, legal problems, trauma, or tragedy, must be handled with care, but they need not be avoided. The telling of unfortunate stories can bring healing and transformation to both the teller and the listener.

Look for Clues to Family Treasures

Make a special note of any family treasures that might be mentioned, such as family Bibles, journals, pictures, or heirlooms. Some of these could open up new avenues of discovery in your family's history.

Verify Names and Places

At the end of the interview, go over the name of every person and place mentioned. Verify these with the narrator for accuracy and correct spelling.

Finishing Up

After you finish an interview, thank the storyteller for sharing part of his or her life. Label and save all tapes, notes, and other documents with the names of participants, dates, and locations.

Share the Wealth!

With permission, make copies of whatever you create from the interview to share with family and friends.