



### **Handout: Possible Interview Questions for Oral History Interviews**

Note: These questions do not cover every topic you might want to discuss in a family history interview. Use these to get you started, and then use what you know about the person and his/her family to create your own!

#### **Simple starter questions:**

1. When and where were you born?
2. Did you have siblings? What were their names and birth dates?
3. What were your parents' names?
4. Where did you live as a child?

#### **Childhood:**

1. What are your strongest memories of childhood?
2. How did you spend most of your free time when you were a kid? What were your favorite hobbies or pastimes?
3. What do you remember about elementary school? Who was your favorite teacher, and why?
4. What stories do you have about high school? What activities were you involved in?
5. Were you a good student? What subject did you enjoy or excel in (or struggle with) the most and why?
6. Did you attend school anywhere after high school graduation? If so, what do you remember about that?
7. What other jobs did you have early in life? Which was your favorite or least favorite?
8. Describe your childhood home(s). What was your room like? Describe smells, sounds, textures.
9. What was your neighborhood like when you were growing up?
9. Did you have pets? Tell me about your favorites. How important were they in your family?



10. Were you in sports or other extracurriculars? Which were your favorites, and what did you learn from them?

11. As a teenager, how did you learn independence and responsibility? Did you have to do chores?

12. What was the hardest part about growing up, or the hardest thing you had to go through while growing up?

### **Parents/Grandparents**

1. Do you know the story of how your parents/grandparents met and fell in love? What can you share about it?

2. What was a typical date like for them?

3. How did he/she propose marriage? Do you know the story?

4. What do you know about your mother's/father's childhood? Did they ever tell you stories?

5. What did you enjoy doing with your father/grandfather/mother/grandmother when you were young?

6. Did your family take trips or go on vacations? Describe one of the best trips you ever took.

7. How did your family celebrate holidays? What are your memories of those occasions?

### **Language/Names:**

1. What language did your parents or grandparents speak? If they had to learn a new language, how did they do it?

2. How did you get your name? Were you named after parents, grandparents, or other relatives?

### **Immigration (if it applies to the interviewee's family):**

1. Did the family members ever talk about why they left their home country?

2. Did they discuss what it was like to make the journey to their new home? How did they travel?

3. Have you been to the hometowns of your ancestors in [country]? What do you know of these areas?



**Work:**

1. How did they settle on their occupations? What did they say about their work?
2. What did they like or dislike about their work? Did they change jobs a few times over the years?
3. Did they work to the end of their lives or did they retire? How did life change when they retired?

**Historical Events:**

1. Did your grandparents ever talk about how the Great Depression affected them? Was there ever a time when they worried about having enough money? What stories can you share about that?
2. Did anyone serve in a war or in the military in general? Describe their service and how it affected the family.
3. Were there any catastrophes—health crisis, natural disaster, etc.?
4. Describe any other events, positive or negative, that made an impact on your family.

**Religion/Politics/Community:**

1. Was your family religious? What role did faith play in their lives?
2. Were they involved in their community and/or church? What groups or activities were important to them?
3. Were they politically active or have strong political beliefs? How was that communicated in the family?
4. Was your family involved in charitable causes? Give me some examples.

**Descriptions of family members:**

1. How would you describe his/her physical characteristics?
2. Tell me about his/her temperament or personality? (Sense of humor, quick temper, always smiling, etc.)
3. Describe him as a parent/grandparent. Did he/she enjoy the role? What kinds of interactions did you have?



4. Did he/she have any particular quotes or sayings that he/she often used? Signature phrases?
5. How did they die? Were they sick for a time, and who cared for them? Do you remember the funeral?
6. What were their special skills or talents? Was he/she a good cook? Describe some of his/her specialty dishes.
7. Was he/she a strict disciplinarian? How did he/she approach parenting?
9. What were the greatest lessons your dad/mom/grandmother/grandfather taught you?

**General:**

1. In what ways are you like your parents? Grandparents?
2. What do you wish you knew about your parents that they never told you or that you never thought to ask?
3. What was the most important turning point in your life? Describe what happened, what it meant, and how you felt about it.
4. Who has influenced you the most? Why? How have you changed as a result of your interaction with this person?
5. How has the world changed since you were young? What is better, and why? What is worse, and why?
6. Think of a time when you did something you shouldn't have. Describe the incident and the feelings it created.
7. What is the best piece of wisdom you learned from your family?
8. What would you like to be remembered for?
9. What are the best decisions you've made in your life? What are the worst?

**Final Question:**

1. Is there anything you'd like to add?