

Conducting Family History Interviews

Your relatives and others who knew your ancestors may remember important events and dates that have not been recorded. They may have family heirlooms, records, mementos, photographs, and other valuable items. They may have interesting family stories to tell, and they can sometimes direct you to others who knew your ancestors or to other relatives you may not know. A personal interview may be the best way to glean family history information. You can also contact relatives by phone, by letter, or by e-mail if you are not able to meet in person.

Contact the person:

Tell the person who you are and how you are related to him or her. Explain that you are doing family history or genealogical research. Tell the person which families or family members you would like to learn about and what you would like to know. Allow the person sufficient time to find papers or records or to think about what he or she can remember.

Prepare in advance:

Write down the questions you want to ask. Open-ended questions are most effective.

Open-ended: Tell me about your mother's immigration to this country.

Close-ended: Did your mother immigrate to this country?

Gather information you have such as completed family group records and pedigree charts. You can share this information and ask if it is correct. Plan to record what you learn using pencil and paper, a tape recorder, a camera, or a video camera. If you are interviewing an oral historian or a village elder, learn the proper ways to approach and work with him or her.

Conduct the interview:

Bring or send family photographs and ask the person if he or she can identify people in them. Don't be in a hurry. Give the person time to think and respond at his or her own pace. Be prepared to come back or send additional correspondence if necessary. Ask about records, certificates, photographs, or other artifacts. As you are told about them, write down the information. Ask for permission to make copies of records. Take photographs or video footage of the artifacts if you can. Express appreciation for the information that you receive.

Use the information:

Update records with any new information you have gathered. Make a transcript or report of your interview, and ask the person you interviewed to read it and make corrections. Ask for permission to copy the report and distribute it to family members. Give a copy to the person you interviewed. Contact other relatives you learned about. See if you have enough information to perform temple ordinances.

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Interview Questions

You may want to use some of the following questions as you interview family members. These questions focus on getting genealogical information that will help submit names to the temple.

Family Members

1. What is your full name? When and where were you born? Who did you marry? Who are your grandchildren?
2. Do you have photos of your family members that we could look at?
3. Who is your Father? Mother? When and where were they born? Married ?
4. What are the names of your brothers and sisters? When and where were they born?
What schools did you/they attend? Who did they marry?
5. What memories can you share about your father? Mother? Siblings?
6. What religion(s) were practiced in your home?
7. What jobs do you remember your parents and other family members doing?
8. Will you show me some of your old family documents or artifacts? Do you have any things like family bibles that might have their names and birth dates in it?
9. Is or was anyone in the family interested in family history? Do you have any genealogical forms concerning them (family trees, pedigree charts, family group records) about your family?

Extended Family

10. Do you have photos of the family members that we could look at?
11. What can you tell me about your father's relatives? Mothers relatives?
12. Do you know their full names? When and where were they born? Married? Died? Buried?
13. Where did some of these extended family members live. Did they immigrate to this country?
14. What memories do you have of extended family members such as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc.? Will you share with me some of the old family stories?
15. Are there any family members who kept a journal or who wrote a historical account of your family? Who were they? Are any of these documents available for me to see?
16. Did you or any of your relatives serve in the military? Which wars did you or other relatives fight in? Will you share some of their war stories with me?
17. Is there anyone in the family who owns a family bible or a family register?
18. Will you show me some of your old family documents or artifacts?

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Appendix A

Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Recording Equipment

Equipment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Paper and Pencil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inexpensive. • Less threatening to people who are nervous about being recorded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impossible to record the interview word-for-word.
Audio Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively inexpensive. • Can record the interview accurately. • Enables immediate playback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not create a photo of the interviewee. • Can make it difficult to determine who is talking during group interviews. • Recording equipment can be intimidating to some people. • Recording equipment can malfunction.
Telephone Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively inexpensive. • Can record the interview accurately. • Works well for elderly people who live far away and who do not have the energy to talk very long. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not create a photo of the interviewee. • Difficult to create the same rapport as face-to-face interviews. • Recording equipment can malfunction. • Can be illegal if one of the persons being recorded does not know that a recording is being made.
Camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can create visual images of interviewee as well as heirlooms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not create an audio copy of the interviewee's voice. • Requires additional equipment to accurately record interview.
Video Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can record the interview accurately. • Can create visual images of interviewee as well as heirlooms. • Enables immediate playback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expensive. • Can be intimidating to the interviewee. • More difficult to transcribe. • Recording equipment can malfunction • May require a release form signed by the interviewee if you plan to use the recording in some forums.
Digital Video Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Records in digital format, which is directly transferable to computer. • Enables immediate playback. • Can be easily transcribed, since audio and video tracks can be separated. • More easily transcribed, since audio and video tracks can be separated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More expensive. • Can be intimidating to interviewee. • Recording equipment can malfunction.

Appendix B

Open-Ended Questions

This is only a preliminary list of questions you can ask in an interview. The kinds of questions will vary depending on your circumstances and the person you interview. Modify the questions or add to them according to your needs.

What is your earliest memory?
What were some of your family's traditions?
What was the happiest day of your life?
Tell a story your mother or father told you when you were young.
What places have you visited?
What family heirloom do you have?
What childhood games did you play?
Tell about a childhood hiding place?
What were Sundays like when you were growing up?
Describe your feeling or testimony of Jesus Christ. How did you gain that knowledge?
What prayers have you had answered?
Describe the most serious illness or accident that you have had.
Do you remember any of your grandparents? Any great-grandparents? What were their names? What were they like?
What were your siblings like?
What trips or vacations do you remember?
What special events took place in your neighborhood while you were growing up?
What was your hometown like?
What were politics like there?
How many people were in your family? Describe each family member.
What kinds of household chores did you do as a child? Which did you enjoy? Not enjoy?
What aunts, uncles, or cousins do you remember? What were they like?
What were your favorite childhood activities?
Did you serve in the military? If so, where and when? What was it like?
What special school memories do you have? Who were your favorite teachers?
What challenges did you face as a child?
What challenges have you faced as an adult?
How did you first meet your spouse?
How did your father spend his time?
How did your mother spend her time?
Tell about your ancestors you know about—names and dates and any stories about them.
What are the names of your children? What are their birth dates, where and were they born and what were the circumstances of their birth, and their lives?
How, when, where did you learn to drive?
Tell about some of the most notable people in your hometown.
Tell about some of your neighbors as a child, as a youth, and as an adult.
What changes have you seen in your lifetime in technology, society, politics, and so on?
Tell about the house you live in. Where else have you lived?
Tell about the house you lived in during your childhood. Do you remember addresses or phone numbers?
Tell about the places where you have worked.
Tell about your civic or political activities.
What did your father do for a living? How did he get to work? What time did he leave for work and get home? Did he take a lunch? Who did he work with?
Tell about your early romances.
Who were your best friends?
What pets have you had?
What was it like when you children left home?
How did you discipline your children? How did your parents discipline you?
Tell the words of a song from your childhood. What memories does it bring?
What brings you the most peace and why?
What can you remember about the day you were baptized?
What Church leaders do you remember? What do you remember about them?
What is your advice to those younger than you?