

To preserve your family stories, all you need is a list of people to interview, a tape recorder and a copy of this book, which contains more than 400 questions on 30 different topics.

Preserve Your Family History (A Step-by-Step Guide for Writing Oral Histories)

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Preserve Your Family History

**A Step-by-Step Guide for
Interviewing Family Members
and
Writing Oral Histories**

LeAnn R. Ralph

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Part I: Everyone Has a Story to Tell.....	3
Part II: Step-by-Step Instructions & Tips For Gathering & Writing Your Family Stories	7
1. Decide which people you would like to interview.	7
2. Ask for permission to conduct an interview.	7
3. Set a formal date and time for the interview.....	8
4. Provide a list of questions several days or weeks before the interview.	9
5. Focus on a single subject or event in each list of questions.	10
6. Use the ‘who, what, where, when, how, and why’ strategy when formulating your questions.....	11
7. Ask open-ended questions and not ‘yes or no’ or ‘one word answer’ questions.....	11
8. Use a tape recorder to record the interview.	12
9. Chat about something else for a while if the person you are interviewing seems nervous at the prospect of being tape- recorded.....	14
10. Transcribe the tape and write up your notes.....	15
11. Edit the manuscript when you have finished transcribing the tape.....	16
12. Spread out your interviews.	17
13. Print the stories from your computer and put them into a three-ring binder or publish them in another way.....	18

Part III: Questions	21
Subject #1: Hometown	21
Subject #2: School (elementary; high school; post-secondary).....	22
Subject #3: Brothers/Sisters/Cousins.....	25
Subject #4: Mother	27
Subject #5: Father	30
Subject #6: Childhood Home.....	32
Subject #7: Wedding Day	34
Subject # 8: Spouse/Marriage.....	36
Subject # 9: Adult Home	38
Subject #10: Children	39
Subject #11: Birthdays.....	41
Subject #12: Spring.....	43
Subject #13: Summer.....	44
Subject #14: Fall/Autumn.....	45
Subject #15: Winter	46
Subject #16: Easter	47
Subject #17: Fourth of July.....	48
Subject #18: Thanksgiving	49
Subject #19: Christmas	51
Subject #20: Other Holidays.....	53
Subject #21: War	54
Subject #22: Pets.....	55
Subject #23: Hobbies.....	56

Subject #24: Food	57
Subject #25: Occupation/Work.....	58
Subject #26: Illness and Injuries.....	59
Subject #27: Friends	61
Subject #28: Neighbors.....	62
Subject #29: Church/Religion.....	63
Subject #30: Changes	64
About the Author	65
Need Help Editing Your Manuscript?	67

Part I

Everyone Has a Story to Tell

“Everyone has a story to tell.”

It might sound like a cliché—but it’s true. After working as a newspaper reporter for nearly 10 years, I know that everyone does, indeed, have a story to tell.

Consider the gentleman and his wife, who, when they retired from dairy farming in Wisconsin, built a house on a portion of their acreage and then developed cross-country ski trails that run along a creek. The trails are open to anyone and everyone. Free of charge. Complete with pairs of cross-country skis that people can borrow if they don’t have their own. Each year, the husband and wife pay for an advertisement in local newspapers inviting their neighbors and other community members to go cross-country skiing on their property. Why? As it turns out, many years ago, the man was a championship ski-jumper, and he and his wife want to introduce others to the joys of skiing.

And then there’s the group of people who meet at a municipal hall in a tiny village in Wisconsin once a week to enjoy ballroom dancing. Some of them drive as far as 75 miles one way—rain, snow, wind, below zero temperatures—nothing stops them. These folks are in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, and they have energy to spare. They have been enjoying their dances at the municipal hall for years, and each one of them has a story to tell about how they learned to dance and where their dancing has taken them.

There’s also the artist who lives in the country and paints wildlife watercolors. On a winter day, 200 wild turkeys visit her backyard in rural Wisconsin to enjoy the corn she has put out for them. Deer,

pheasants and song birds also call her property home, as do a number of cats she had rescued from various situations. She, too, has a story to tell about why she left her job at a university to become a full-time artist and of the struggles and financial hardships she endured until her paintings began to sell.

But even before I started working as a journalist, I knew that life experiences make interesting stories. And I didn't have to look any farther than my own family.

My father was born in 1914, and my mother was born in 1916. They lived during a time of enormous change. They went from farming with horses to farming with tractors. They started out milking cows by hand and ended up milking cows with milking machines run by electricity. My mother gave birth to my brother and sister at home. I was born in a hospital. They also experienced many historical events: the Great Depression and World War II and Americans landing on the moon.

As I was growing up, my mother and father would tell stories about their childhoods. Mom was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants, and her grandfather homesteaded our dairy farm in Wisconsin in the late 1800s. Dad was the son of German and Scottish immigrants. When my father was a little boy, his parents worked as cooks in a lumber camp in northern Wisconsin.

Much to my regret, I never asked Mom and Dad to sit down with a tape recorder and tell their stories. My mother died in 1985 at the age of 68. My father passed away in 1992 at the age of 78. The majority of their stories, except for the few that I remember, are lost forever.

If you are willing to apply the techniques I learned during my years as a newspaper reporter about interviewing people and writing their stories, your family stories do not have to share the same fate.

And of course, you can also use the interview techniques and the questions to interview friends and neighbors to capture their stories as well.

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