

BUILDING YOUR RICH FAMILY HISTORY

REVISITING THE PAST, REVIVING THE MEMORIES

A few families keep exquisite records. They keep, and regularly update, albums full of pictures, scrapbooks of mementos, or journals that record day-to-day thoughts and feelings. But most of us have only jumbled boxes of photos, a few precious Christmas cards and a birth certificate or two, leaving us wondering: Who is that person standing next to grandma, anyway? Glorious memories and the histories they represent are kept randomly--if at all.

Knowledge helps us to understand. Many cultures are replete with oral histories. Parents put their children to bed every night with wondrous stories of their *larger-than-life* ancestors. Most of us don't even know the first names of our great-grandparents, the number and names of their siblings or what they did with their lives.

Are there family stories that you remember from your childhood that make you smile? What do you really *know* about your own parents? How did they meet and fall in love? What were the dreams they shared? What was the hardest thing they ever had to do? What was the best joke they ever heard?

Because you are visiting our *Toolkit*, you are probably intimately involved with one or more of your parents on their aging journey, a situation that inevitably requires some difficult conversations. We've designed the *Toolkit* to ease your burden by suggesting a series of interview questions that we believe will lighten the mood, strengthen your family bond and produce a rich family history that you and the generations that follow will treasure.

This interview may be self-administered. Answers can be written or recorded. Perhaps a child may wish to conduct a series of interviews and memorialize the information gathered as your family chooses. Our personal favorite is a voice recording with an accompanying transcript. We have found that some aging parents don't want to be filmed because they would rather to be remembered as being young and vital. Fortunately, for the most part, our voices are timeless. We can imagine the speaker at any age and that pleases us and them.

Here's a place to start recording your family history, your priceless memories:

The Early Years

When were you born? How much did you weigh? Did you have a nickname?

Did you suck your thumb? Did you carry a security blanket?

Who did you look like? Who were you named for?

What is your earliest memory as a child? How old were you?

Where did you live? Describe to me the house you grew up in.

Who were your childhood friends? What were their names? What did you like and dislike about them?

What schools did you attend? What were your best and worst subjects?

Did you have any teachers that made a difference in your life? What did they do that made them special?

What did you want to be when you grew up?

What games did you play?

Describe your home life like? Was it happy/sad/loving/frightening/religious/safe?

Why did you choose that word?

What do you think your father valued? When you were a kid how did you feel toward your father? Why?

What do you think your mother valued? When you were a kid how did you feel toward your mother? Why?

Which of those values do you think you carried into your own life?

Were there any family secrets about your mom, dad, family members or close friends that you were expected to keep? Would you be OK sharing them with me now?

What were you expected to do as chores? Were your parents strict? Why do you say that?

What were you taught to value as a child?

What did you love most about your mother? Your father?

As you grew into your teenage years do you remember your favorite:

Song *When that song was playing, what did you think about? How did that song make you feel?*

Movie *Who saw it with you? Why did you like it so much?*

Actress/Actor

Book/Radio program

Season/Vacation spot

Holiday/Flower/Birthday present

Color/Sport/Food

The Adolescent Years

What school did you graduate from? When?

What is your favorite high school memory?

When did you start to date?

Tell me about your first kiss. Who did you kiss? How was it?

Who was your first crush?

What was the fashion then? What was your favorite article of clothing?

What did you do for fun on weekends?

What was your first part-time job? How much did you get paid?

What was your first full-time job? Did you get a raise?

With whom was your first serious romance?

Did you ever get jilted? By whom? How long did it take you to recover?

How Our Family Started

When did you meet mom/dad?

What did he/she do for a living?

Was it love at first sight?

Why did you like him/her?

What was your favorite date activity?

How long before you got engaged?

Was the proposal memorable? What did you/he say?

How long was it before you got married?

What is your most vivid memory of your wedding day? Tell me about your honeymoon.

Were there any memorable wedding gifts?

What was the most memorable vacation?

Question: As a wife/husband I tried to be...

Question: As a mother/father I tried to be...

Let's talk about your relatives. Let's begin with your parents.

What did they do?

What were their virtues and vices?

What did you like and dislike about each of them?

What did you admire about them?

What were their dreams?

What did they believe in?

What did you call them?

What are your most vivid memories of them?

Are there any great family stories about them?

Can we try to do a family tree?

Place family tree skeleton here

Tell me about all your relatives. Describe each of them. What did they mean to you? What did you like them? Why?

Tell Me More About You

Who made you laugh?

What made you sad?

What dreams did you share over the years?

What dreams do you still hope to fulfill?

What is your greatest achievement? Why?

Is there anything you regret?

What skills did you learn in life? What are your favorite hobbies?

What was the hardest decision you ever had to make? Do you think you made the right choice?

Who have you most admired? Why?

If you could invite anyone in history to dinner who would it be? What would you talk about?

If you had all the time and money in the world what would you do with it?

What was the hardest decision you ever had to make? Do you think you made the right choice?

What was the most frightening moment of your life?

If you were in perfect health and money and location where not an issue, what would be a perfect day?

Is there a secret you have never told anyone? If so, would you like to tell it now? You certainly don't have to, but if you'd like to do so, this would be a perfect time.

Do we have any skeletons in our closet that you would like to tell us about?

These Histories May Come in Handy! Create scrapbooks, memory books and make the organization of those boxes of old photos a family activity. These treasures become not only family heirlooms, but can serve as an invaluable resource for families with a loved one stricken with Alzheimer's or other memory loss.

Sadly, visitations in memory care facilities often wane as patients fail to recognize family and friends and can no longer converse. These visitors begin to feel that their visits serve no purpose and besides they leave feeling empty and depressed. Memory often recedes as it was created--short-term leaves and old memories linger.

Create these albums and then leave them in the rooms of your loved ones. The people and events they represent will provide material for hours of great conversation and needed patient stimulus. The conversations may be repetitive, and your parent may have no idea who you are, but you will both benefit from the experience. Happy scrapbooking!