

Family Trees That Talk - Interviewing relatives

As a means of researching family trees, interviewing relatives can be a really enjoyable experience for both parties. But, there are some important rules. As with anything worthwhile, genealogy does have guidelines that must be followed if you are at all serious about family history.

5 Simple Rules

* Contact them first - DON'T just turn up on their doorstep, cassette recorder in hand. Get their permission to do the interview and be honest about why you would like to speak to them.

* Be careful not to offend them by asking questions that maybe too personal or of a very sensitive nature. Some people will answer any question you throw at them

whereas others will be more guarded. Obviously if you already have a close relationship with Uncle George, he will be quite relaxed in talking to you. Aunty Madge, however, who you wouldn't know if you fell over her, is not as likely to be so forthcoming in laying out the laundry, clean or otherwise, of the family!

* It's important to have a list of questions ready. You may not ask them all or you may need to alter the focus of some during the interview, but you should have a list of core questions ready. Why? Because this will ensure that you don't forget anything important and secondly it gives the impression that you actually know what you are doing. Dithering and looking up at the ceiling every 5 minutes trying to remember what to ask next does not inspire confidence and will likely make the interviewee uncomfortable.

* DON'T outstay your welcome. You are the only one that can judge when that might be.

* Show your appreciation for their time by either presenting them with a small gift or simply saying those magic words, "thank you".

Verify Or Else

Family interviews are a fantastic way to fill in the gaps in your family trees, and will provide far more information than you could ever glean from a marriage

certificate. The quality and detail can be extraordinary and enlightening, BUT don't accept everything Uncle George says as being entirely accurate. His "true story" may not be true at all. THE FIRST RULE IN GENEALOGY IS VERIFY - wherever possible. The truth can be stretched, twisted, bent and made to disappear altogether. That doesn't mean Uncle George is lying, he may just be repeating what he was told by someone else or may have forgotten the details over time.

My Story

Here is an example of just such a point from my own family history. It is very illustrative of the need, when researching family trees, for accurate information.

My great-grandfather George BURLS came out from England and settled in rural Victoria, Australia. My grandmother, his youngest daughter, always insisted that he was a detective and that he solved a murder investigation in a nearby town. Well, that was all I had to go on. Firstly, if there was a murder the local newspaper was the place to start. I knew I would have to go back to the early 1900's because my great-grandfather died in 1919 aged 70.

Back at about that time a water reservoir called the Waranga Basin was being excavated and so there was a great influx of workers around the area.

Two of the

workers living in the tent city that sprung up were James Edwards and William Skinner. They were friends but Skinner got drunk one night and attacked Edwards

with a shovel. He defended himself with a nearby axe and killed Skinner. Fearing the police would not believe it was self-defence, Edwards proceeded

to cut up the body, placed the parts in hessian bags and threw them into the basin. They were later found and an investigation ensued. All these details I got from a newspaper, The Rushworth Chronicle of 1905.

George BURLS and his son Alfred were rabbit trapping, which was their occupation, when they were approached by the culprit, Edwards, who they both knew from another job site where they had previously worked together. Edwards denied ever knowing them and said he wanted to buy some tobacco. He did so then left. They were both called to give evidence at the subsequent trial. End of story!

The above are the facts of the case. My grandmothers version was somewhat more elaborate, granting my great-grandfather, who by the way only had one eye, with the tracking down and apprehension of Edwards. But again, she may have just been repeating what she had been told.

Handy Interviewing Questions

Okay, so here are some sample questions to get your family trees talking. These are in addition to the mandatory ones such as names, dates of birth, marriage death etc.

1. Describe your childhood - relationship with parents, siblings.
2. The greatest joy of your childhood was?
3. As a child, what was your worst fear?
4. What was your father's occupation and what was the quality of your life like as a child?
5. How would you describe your parents and or grandparents - physical characteristics and qualities?
6. What is the most pleasant memory you have of your parents and or grandparents?
7. What was the dumbest thing you ever did as a child?
8. What was your most memorable holiday?
9. What was one thing that attracted you to your spouse? Why?
10. What was the most difficult moment for you as a parent?
11. What one thing would you change in your role as a parent?
12. What would you like your children to most remember about you?
13. What was your greatest fear as a parent?
14. What activities do you enjoy?
15. What do you find really annoying in other peoples actions or characteristics?

Play with the questions. Add to them if you wish. They are just to get you thinking.
Good hunting!

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About the Author

Wayne Thomas has been a genealogist for 25 years. His website for beginners and beyond at www.new2-genealogy.com has heaps of free resources, tutorials, links and a free ebook.