

Conducting a GENEALOGICAL Study

Introduction

In *Seven Brave Women*, author Betsy Hearne describes generations of courageous women in her family. You can also learn about brave women in your own family and community! By conducting what is known as a genealogical study, you can explore the history of your family by asking questions and recording important information. Genealogy (jean-e-ology) simply means the study or investigation of ancestry and family histories. The history of your family and community is also a part of your history!

Instructions

How to Write Your Own History

Step 1: Be Prepared!

Many important decisions must be made before you can begin your genealogical study.

Who should I interview?

The people who can best help you gather a rich family history are older relatives. Can you interview your grandmother? By asking your grandmother about her grandmother, you will learn about your great-great grandmother—a woman who shaped your family history, but also someone about whom you may know very little. Perhaps you have an aunt or uncle who can tell you the story of places your family has lived? The history of your community is also an important part of your history. Do you have a neighbor that has lived in your town for many years? If you have many people to choose from, try to think of someone older who would be comfortable answering detailed questions.



Katherine and Joseph Tobia, grandparents of Stephen, Joseph, and Laura Sangillo.

What do I need?

You must consider what type of interview will be best suited to the family member being interviewed.

- **Tape recorder** – This is a very popular choice for genealogical studies. You can record a lot of information on tapes, and listening to the voice of the person being interviewed makes for a more personal and memorable interview. Make sure you have enough batteries and blank tapes, and that your tape recorder is in good working condition.
- **Video camera** – Videotaping is another good way to record your interview. Adding a visual component to your interview makes for an even more emotional and memorable interview than a cassette tape.
- **Note Pad** – Some people may feel uncomfortable being taped. In this case taking notes would be best. You may also want to take notes even if you tape your interview on cassette or video. It will help direct your interview in an organized way.

Step 2: The Interview

Since you want the person you are interviewing to tell stories, try to formulate questions that will be answered with lots of detail, instead of questions that would get “yes” or “no” answers. Simplify your questions to make them easier to answer. Do not ask a series of questions within a question. Give the person you are interviewing enough time to answer. One question can trigger a memory and lead into a story about your cultural or community roots!

Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the names of your parents?
- Where were they born?
- Where were you born?
- What year was it when you were my age?
- Tell me about the town you lived in when you were growing up?
- Did you have any customs or traditions celebrated on holidays?
- What was your favorite thing to do when you were my age?
- How was going to school different for you than it is for me?
- What major news stories have affected your life?
- Did you ever move as a child?



- What one invention has changed your life for the better?
- What was the best decision you have made in your life?
- Who was the first president you voted for?
- What is your wish for me?

The questions above are only a guide. Countless questions can be asked to suit your needs. You can also ask, “Is there a question you thought I would ask, but did not?” This gives the person you are interviewing an opportunity to talk about a subject of their choice, and a story or lesson they want to pass on to you!

Other tips...

It might be a good idea to bring along family objects, photographs or other documents to trigger memories or other information for your study. Maybe you have an old newspaper clipping of something important that happened in your town.

Holidays and family reunions are perfect opportunities to conduct a genealogical study. Your other family and friends will almost always be excited to sit in on your interview, and may be able to add their own stories.

Make sure the person you are interviewing is comfortable in every sense of the word! Make the physical environment pleasing for this person. Have them sit in a comfortable seat. Also make the interview comfortable for them in other ways. Be sure to tell them

exactly why you want to interview them, and how you plan to use the information you have gathered. If their mind is not at ease, you may not get all the information you are looking for.



Frances Shoop, Elva Thomas, May Shoop
Chester, Pennsylvania circa 1924

You may want to visit with them again and ask new or expanded questions. Their answers may be richer in detail once they have had more time to think about them. Above all, have fun! Pay close attention to the stories you are being told, and cherish the special opportunity you have to learn about your heritage!