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Preserve your family's history and heritage through an oral history project.

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TREASURED STORIES

Our life stories are tapestries written from moments in time—memories, traditions, milestones great and small. By conducting an oral history project, you can capture and preserve the unique stories, history and heritage of your family. Recording family stories by audio or video allows you to connect with loved ones across generations and celebrate their lives while they're still around. "These stories have enduring value," says Amy Boxrud, executive director at the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA). "It's important to draw these stories out before they are lost."

Not sure how to conduct your own oral history project? Here's how to get started.

STEP 1

DEFINE YOUR GOALS AND THEME.

If the project sounds daunting, relax: You don't have to ask every family member to share his or her entire life story. There are many ways to approach oral histories. "Start by asking yourself what topics interest you, or what you hope to learn," Boxrud says. One approach is to focus on one person, capturing as much information as you can about their unique life story. Boxrud suggests focusing on an older family member first, or someone whose stories are most in danger of being lost.

Or, if you want to interview multiple family members, you can narrow your scope by threading the stories together with a unifying theme. For example, you can focus on a particular place (grandpa's farm), pastime (quilting) or family tradition (holiday baking). Whichever method you choose, defining your goals and theme will help guide the questions you ask, people you interview and method of presentation.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

You don't have to break the bank or be a professional videographer to record your interviews. Here are a few well-rated and affordable options:



Zoom H1 Handy Digital Recorder

This ultra-light handheld recorder is smaller than most cell phones, yet captures sound with superb clarity and definition. Easily transfer files to your computer using the USB port.

Tascam DR-40 Digital Recorder

This portable device has a long battery life (up to 20 hours) and two built-in adjustable microphones. Many users love the built-in XLR jacks for hooking up external mics (optional).



StoryCorps App

This free app allows you to record and archive audio interviews, right from your smartphone.

After recording, you can share the recording on the StoryCorps website, have it archived at the Library of Congress or save it privately to your StoryCorps account to export later.

Skype Call Recording

In 2018, Skype rolled out the ability to record Skype video calls on both desktop and mobile devices—a great option for capturing oral histories of long-distance loved ones. (Note: Only available on the latest version of Skype.)



Audacity

With this free audio recording and editing software, you can record live audio through an external microphone connected to your laptop or computer.

Voice Recording Apps

Voice Memos app, which is equipped on iPhones, allows you to record a simple audio session. For Android phones, you can download free voice recording apps from the Google Play store. Tip: Hook up an external microphone for enhanced sound quality.



STEP 2

REACH OUT TO FAMILY MEMBERS.

Now that you've defined the over-arching goal and theme, identify relevant family members to contact for an interview. Explain the goals of the project and how you plan to preserve and use the recordings. During the conversation, keep the tone relaxed, yet respectful. Allow them to respond with any questions or concerns about the project.

STEP 3

PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEWS.

→ Questions

Prepare a list of questions tailored to your interview subject and project theme. Boxrud suggests using open-ended questions that encourage more detailed answers. Questions that begin with “how,” “what” or “why” often elicit good responses. You may also want to send your family member some questions ahead of time so they can prepare.

→ Time/Location

Find a relaxed and comfortable location for the interview. Often this will be the family member's home. However, the timing and location of the interview may vary according to holidays, traditions or other factors. If the relative lives far away, you could record the interview by phone or video chat.

→ Recording Equipment

Select your recording method and test out any equipment beforehand. Recording not only preserves the stories in their original form, it also allows you to focus on the interviewee (instead of feverishly taking notes).

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SUBMIT YOUR STORY!
NAHA's Oral History Project is collecting first-person accounts of Norwegians who emigrated to North America after WWII.
naha.stolaf.edu/oralhistory

STEP 4

CONDUCT THE INTERVIEWS.

Boxrud suggests starting the interview by making the family member feel as comfortable as possible. You can also ease into the conversation with some informal small talk, then recap of the project's goals and theme, as well as what you plan to do with the recordings.

Before diving into any questions, make sure to do these two things:

1 Obtain written consent.

Have the family member sign a release granting permission to record the conversation and use it for your project. Sample release forms are available online through various sources, including NAHA's website in their Oral History Guidelines PDF. Check out the form at naha.stolaf.edu/oralhistory.

2 Test out the equipment.

Record a minute of conversation then play it back to ensure proper sound quality. You could use this minute to label the recording by stating your name and the interviewee's name, as well as the location and date of the interview. Position the device so it can clearly capture your voice and your family member's voice, and minimize background noise from the TV, radio, dishwasher or other people.

Some tips for a successful interview:

- “Don't be too rigid with your questions—let the conversation take a natural course,” says Boxrud.
- **Feel free** to venture off course for a bit if the conversation takes an interesting turn.
- **Be patient** during pauses or silence.
- Boxrud also suggests giving plenty of **nonverbal feedback**,
- such as maintaining good eye contact and smiling/nodding along.
- **Bring along** any photos, mementos or visual aids that might help stimulate conversation (and your loved one's memory).
- **Bring pen and paper** to jot down any interesting observations or key messages.

STEP 5

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once you've collected the stories, there are many ways to bring them to life.



Book

Transcribe the interviews and turn them into a collection of stories or essays—supplemented with photography, maps, family trees or recipes. Blurb, Lulu, and Barnes & Noble Press (formerly NOOK Press) are all good platforms that allow you to create and publish your own custom book.



Documentary

Supplement your video recordings with music and commentary to create a cinematic or documentary-style presentation. There are many free or low-cost video editing apps available today, including Apple's iMovie and Microsoft's Movie Maker (for Windows 10, the video editing tools have been integrated directly into the Photos app).



Website or Blog

Create your own family website—no web design or coding experience needed. Website builders like Wix, Weebly and Squarespace all offer a variety of beautifully designed, easy-to-edit templates. Both free and paid plans are available.



Exhibit or Slideshow

Have an upcoming family reunion? You could set up an exhibit to display the stories, photos and objects related to your interviews. “Or you could set up a sound booth where listeners can play clips of the interviews,” Boxrud adds. Another idea: incorporate audio, imagery and video into a slideshow presentation.



Shared File

If you'd rather share the stories in their original form, digital file storage services like Google Drive and Dropbox allow you to securely store and share a variety of file formats (e.g., video, audio, images). Bonus: You can restrict access by password-protecting the files.