

Family History Questions to Ask Your Relatives

By Kimberly Powell, Professional Genealogist

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A great way to uncover clues to your family history or to get great quotes for journaling in a heritage scrapbook is a family interview. By asking the right open-ended questions, you're sure to collect a wealth of family tales. Use this list of family history interview questions to help you get started, but be sure to personalize the interview with your own questions as well.

Besides the standard birth, marriage, and death dates of your ancestors, ask about their careers, volunteering, military duty, and key achievements during their life!

Questions About Their Childhood

1. What is your full name? Why did your parents select this name for you? Did you have a nickname?
2. When and where were you born?
3. How did your family come to live there?
4. Were there other family members in the area? Who?
5. What was the house (apartment, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones?
6. Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
7. What is your earliest childhood memory?
8. Describe the personalities of your family members.
9. What kind of games did you play growing up?
10. What was your favorite toy and why?
11. What was your favorite thing to do for fun (movies, go to the beach, etc.)?
12. Did you have family chores? What were they? Which was your least favorite?
13. Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?
14. What was school like for you as a child? What were your best and worst subjects? Where did you attend grade school? High school? College?
15. What school activities and sports did you participate in?
16. Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
17. Who were your childhood heroes?
18. What were your favorite songs and music genres?
19. Did you have any pets? If so, what kind and what were their names?
20. What was your religion growing up? What church, if any, did you attend?
21. Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?
22. Who were your friends when you were growing up?

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Questions About the Family

1. What world events had the most impact on you when you were a child? Did any of them personally affect your family?
2. Describe a typical family dinner. Did you all eat together as a family? Who did the cooking? What were your favorite foods?
3. How were holidays (birthdays, Christmas, etc.) celebrated in your family? Did your family have special traditions?
4. How is the world today different from what it was like when you were a child?
5. Who was the oldest relative you remember as a child? What do you remember about them?
6. What do you know about your family surname?
7. Is there a naming tradition in your family, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?
8. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors?
9. Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?
10. Have any recipes been passed down to you from family members?
11. Are there any physical characteristics that run in your family?
12. Are there any special heirlooms, photos, bibles, or other memorabilia that have been passed down in your family?

Questions About Their Adult Life

1. What was the full name of your spouse? Siblings? Parents?
2. When and how did you meet your spouse? What did you do on dates?
3. What was it like when you proposed (or were proposed to)? Where and when did it happen? How did you feel?
4. Where and when did you get married?
5. What memory stands out the most from your wedding day?
6. How would you describe your spouse? What do (did) you admire most about them?
7. What do you believe is the key to a successful marriage?
8. How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?
9. Why did you choose your children's names?
10. What was your proudest moment as a parent?
11. What did your family enjoy doing together?
12. What was your profession and how did you choose it?
13. If you could have had any other profession, what would it have been? Why wasn't this your first choice?

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14. Of all the things you learned from your parents, what do you feel was the most valuable?
15. What accomplishments are you most proud of?
16. What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?

While these questions make great conversation starters, the best way to uncover the good stuff is through more of a storytelling session than a Q&A. Asking the right questions will provide a great family history of your ancestors!