

Finding Family – September 2017

Interviewing Aunt Martha

By Karen Buzdak

Growing up in the '40s and '50s in Mill Valley, families were still vacationing in August. School started after Labor Day. In some years it even started after Admission Day (Sept. 9). To this day, my need to start anew or take a class does not kick in until September. Since my 23andMe (DNA) reports do not indicate a variant in "seasonal clock," it must be due to nurture, not nature. So, if your seasonal clock parallels mine, I invite you take the first step (class) in genealogy: the oral interview.

Ideally, the best way to start creating your family tree is interviewing your older living relatives. They have a wealth of stories to share with you this upcoming holiday season, and some planning ahead is necessary. As in Chevy Chase's "Christmas Vacation," perhaps the relatives can spend a whole month with you, starting with Thanksgiving. This allows ample time to conduct several oral interviews.

Only the most important interviewing tips will be presented here; however, if you have an interest in learning more about taking an oral history, one book on my shelf is entitled: "The Oral History Manual," Second Edition, by Sommer and Quinlan. It is also easy to download the process for free from professional genealogists' websites.

At the time you extend your invitation to Aunt Martha and Uncle Bill, tell them that you are creating your family tree and that you would like to spend some undivided time interviewing them.

Ask them to bring along some family photos, which will help evoke those memories of their lives as a small child, as a teen, and the early marriage years. Have ready some of your own photos.

The stories will become the basis of your future research and will also give you the historical and cultural background not often found in a document.

The second step in the interview preparation is to formulate a set of questions.

Although you may have a question about a specific event, such as a marriage date, it is best to ask a question that is broad enough to evoke a memory or two but not so broad as to cut off an answer. In other words, don't ask: "Tell me what you know about cousin Sue," but rather ask: "Cousin Sue lived nearby, do you remember walking to school together and what that was like." (Beware the two-part question, however.) You could easily follow up with the question: "Did you like school?"

Decide if you want to record your interview visually, audibly or both. Before you start the interview, however, make sure you ask Aunt Martha and Uncle Bill for permission. All means of recording, even note-taking, may be distracting to the storyteller. Your goal is to make sure whomever you interview is comfortable.

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Practice being a good listener. Be ready to listen to clues that might lead to a new question or to an inconsistency. Be ready to take a long-winded answer and put it back on track. Should your aunt or uncle seem tired before the ideal 45-minute interview is up, by all means end it. They would more likely return for a second interview if they found the process to be pleasant. They're visiting for the whole month, so you have lots of time.

Hopefully you will find the time to transcribe your notes as soon after the interview as possible. It is surprising how fast details can fade.

As you begin to compile your information in family group sheets, Excel timelines, genealogy software, it will likely become apparent that your research shows that some of the stories were just that, family stories lacking historical accuracy. Professional genealogists have created a genealogical proof standard that will assist you in creating an accurate family tree. Much more about that after the next class on using census documents.