

Step 3: Living Sources
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the third in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." at <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

For centuries, genealogy was an oral tradition among the peoples of the world. In virtually every region, tribe, or clan, at least one person had the responsibility of memorizing the genealogy of the group, sharing it when necessary (at a birth or marriage, for example), and passing the genealogy on to the next generation. Quite often, the individual entrusted with this duty was a highly respected member of the community.

While this tradition may not continue in much of the western world today, we are fortunate that vestiges of this practice have survived in most families regardless of their ethnic heritage. Usually at least one person in every family (referred to as a gatekeeper or flamekeeper) knows a significant amount of that family's history. These people are perhaps the best source of a family's genealogical information.

In Step Three we will suggest ways that the beginning genealogist can utilize this outstanding source of information. We realize that some families do not have a "flame keeper" and we want to share some tips on gathering information from other family members even if they feel they know little about the family's history. Also, we will suggest some methods of gathering information from people who are not a direct part of your family, yet who may prove valuable in providing information for your research.

There are six basic methods of collecting information from your family members or others who may have information useful to your project. Each of these will be examined in detail throughout this article.

Formal personal interview

Informal personal interview

Telephone interview

Letter writing

Querying

Electronic correspondence

Formal Personal Interview

While this title sounds somewhat stuffy, we are referring to a process where your primary goal is meeting with a family member to gather information. There are several books on the market that cover this topic, including *How To Tape Instant Oral Biographies* (New York: Guarionex Press, 1992) by Bill Zimmerman, but the basic rules are the same. First, be certain to contact the person

you wish to interview well in advance. Explain the nature of your project and the type of information you are seeking. This is especially important if you will be interviewing someone with whom you have had little or no contact in the past. The person being interviewed must be comfortable with you and the topic(s). In our own experience we had several opportunities to interview my paternal grandmother, but she was never comfortable discussing her family's past. Unfortunately, she would not supply us with any information on her father's family-the one we needed most at the time.

Second, take the time to be well prepared before the actual interview. Make certain you are clear in your own mind of the information you hope to gather from the interview. Time spent in preparation will pay off in the long run. It is a good idea to write down the questions you plan on asking.

Third, make the interview session as comfortable and relaxing as possible. Do not jump right into the questions; take time to talk. Show the person the equipment you might be using (such as tape recorders, video cameras, etc.) and make sure they are not intimidated by it.

Fourth, give the person ample time to answer the question you have asked, and do not interrupt if at all possible. Should they mention something you had not thought of before, make note of it and go back to it later. Also, have a time limit in mind and adhere to that limit. Conversations such as this can be tiring, especially for an older person. Try to schedule another session rather than continue beyond a reasonable point.

Remember that peoples' memories are not infallible. Confirm the information you gather in one of these interviews with vital records whenever possible. Also, record the specifics of the interview on your research log. The interview is a source of information just like a book and should be noted accordingly.

Informal Personal Interview

The informal interview is our favorite means of gathering information from family members because the opportunity presents itself so often. Every family gathering becomes a potential source of information. After a while, family members know of your interest in genealogy and will bring new information with them to these gatherings. This has worked well for us because we come from large families and the informal interviews have allowed us to remain current with births, marriages, and deaths of cousins and second cousins, even those from different generations. We carry copies of our family group sheets and ask an individual from a particular family group to look over the sheet and provide us with any updates.

Obviously, family reunions are the best type of family gathering because they present the opportunity to see family members you may not have seen for some time. But weddings, holidays, baptisms, and visits offer the same potential. As with any information gathering session, the better prepared you are the more success you will experience. Remember to record the source in your research log.

Telephone Interview

Of course, it is not always possible to visit someone in person for the purpose of gathering genealogical information. Therefore, it is recommended that you use the telephone as a means of conducting the interview. In this case, it is extremely important that you be well prepared. First and foremost, it is a good idea to introduce yourself in advance to the person you will be interviewing and let them know what you want to do. Advance work is vital. If the person is the least bit uncomfortable, they may hang up on you or decline an interview and a very good source of information will be lost. In every other respect, the telephone interview is identical to the personal interview. Remember to record the telephone interview as the source of information in your research log and to verify any information you gather against corroborating evidence such as vital records.

A beginning genealogist sometimes overlooks another aspect of telephoning. If the family name you are researching is unique, it can prove beneficial to call people with the same name listed in the phone book that live in the area you are researching. On numerous occasions we have heard from students who have had considerable luck doing this. While there is the chance the person will tell you they are not interested in getting involved, they may also know information about the family you are researching, or may know of someone in their family who is doing research and provide you with contact information. An excellent source of addresses and phone numbers of people who share the name you are researching can be found on-line at Web sites such as <http://www.whowhere.com>.

Letter Writing

For years, writing letters has been the main source for genealogists trying to gather information, whether from family members or a county courthouse. While people may not write as many letters as they used to, letter writing is still an integral part of the data gathering process. The person receiving the request has time to consider your questions and to respond. Of course, there is no guarantee they will respond, but if you follow the guidelines listed below you will increase the likelihood of getting a response.

1. Above all, be courteous. Any letter that could be considered curt, rude, or demanding is certain to be thrown into the trash. Also, if possible, type your letter. If you do write in pen, print the letter. A hand-written request in pencil is unlikely to be read.
2. Be inclusive. Take the time to identify yourself and to explain your project and the reasons for requesting information. This will make the recipient feel connected to you and your project.
3. Be specific. Make your questions to the point and do not ask for too much information at one time.
4. Be thoughtful. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope with your request. This will increase the chance of getting a response.
5. Be thorough. Keep a letter-writing log in which you note the recipient's name, the date the letter was sent, and the date a response was received.

6. Be prompt. When you receive a reply, answer immediately with a thank you note or follow-up letter.

When writing to a local, county (parish), state, or national office to request some type of vital record (birth, marriage, divorce, death, etc.), the following guidelines will make the task easier and more productive:

1. Determine the correct address of the office and department you wish to contact. Numerous books available through your public library will provide addresses for virtually every records office in the United States and abroad. You can also go on-line to locate information on addresses, costs, and even the electronic availability of records for numerous jurisdictions throughout the United States and the world. Find the exact address before sending your request to avoid having your letter buried in a dead letter file somewhere.

2. Determine the correct fee the office charges for the service you are requesting. The same sources used to provide the address should provide the cost for various records. Always enclose a check or money order for the exact amount; never send cash with your request.

3. Finally, provide specific information for each person you are seeking records about. This information should include:

- a. the specific record you seek
- b. full name of the person whose record is being requested
- c. sex and race
- d. parents' names in full with mother's maiden name
- e. day, month, and year of known events in the person's life
- f. full place name where known events occurred (town, county, state)
- g. reason you are requesting the record
- h. your relationship to the person whose record is being requested.

Letter writing will always be an important aspect of gathering genealogical information. Probably the best advice is to put yourself in the position of the individual receiving the request. What information would you need in a letter to process a request?

Querying

Another traditional method of gathering genealogical information is called querying. There are two possible approaches to this method. First, write down what is known about the individual and what you wish to learn. Be brief and as specific as possible. Mail your request(s) to a magazine or newspaper that publishes such queries. If you wonder which publications include queries, ask for the genealogy collection at your local library and browse through some of the publications your library receives and send your queries to one of them. In some cases, a person who has information will contact you directly. In other cases, the magazine or newspaper will publish responses in future issues. Either way, a well-worded query can produce exciting results and often put you in touch with someone who is researching a similar line.

In this day of high speed Internet connections and the explosion of on-line information, posting a query on the Web has become a leading method of locating specific information or leading you to someone who might have useful information. This method can take various forms but the two most useful are:

1. Posting your query on a bulletin board. Several companies and genealogical societies maintain bulletin boards for this purpose. Visit the site periodically to see if there have been any responses. The new FamilyHistory.com Web site is specifically targeted for such queries in a message board format. It is a free service dedicated to sharing family history data.

2. Maintaining your own Web site. Many people have constructed their own family Web site where other family members or visitors can leave information relevant to a research project.

Electronic Correspondence

As discussed previously, the use of computers has greatly aided the task of the family historian. It is safe to say that the computer, with its organizing software, research CD-ROMs, and ability to connect easily and quickly to the World Wide Web has become the single best tool for today's genealogist. But it is important to remember that the Web is not a substitute for good solid research; it is simply an aid. But if used properly, it can open the door to unimagined information. All the admonitions listed for previous means of gathering data apply.

The task of gathering family information is not an easy one. But using all the resources available greatly increases the chances of building a solid genealogy.