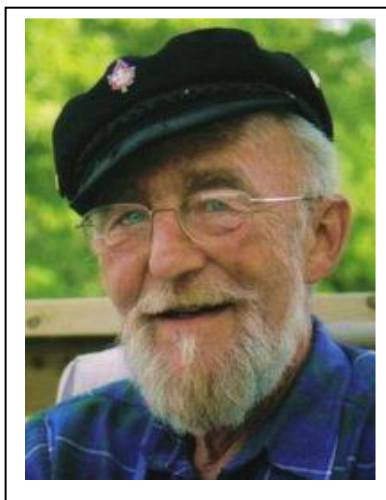


### A Few Tips on Interviewing



For many family historians, one of the most enjoyable forms of research is the interview. There is a lot of literature available on the topic in Oral History books and other sources but I don't think we need to make a heavy trip out of this. There are just a few points to think about that will make the interview successful for you and pleasant for your informant, although some of these will not be necessary or as important if you are interviewing someone you already know well. Once you think about them they seem like common sense but the key is to think about them at the right time.

*Prepare the Informant.* Once you know whom you want to interview and why, you can contact them to explain what you would like to do, why, and how you would like to do it, and why you chose that person. You can set a date for the interview and call the informant the day before to confirm the

arrangement. This also gives the person a bit of time to prepare themselves for it.

*Prepare yourself.* Find out a bit about the informant if you can and familiarize yourself with their background so that you will better know what questions to ask and perhaps what questions to avoid. You might want to put together your interview kit; pencils, pads, camera, tape recorder, extra batteries and tapes, an extension cord. I usually carry an adapter from a 3 to a 2-prong outlet, just in case. Now you can prepare your main questions, the ones that will likely guide the interview.

The way you phrase questions is important. You want to avoid those that require only a yes or no answer and you want to avoid ones that might suggest what you expect the answer to be. If they know what you want, many people will try to please you by telling you what they think you want to hear.

*The Interview.* If at all possible (and that depends on the informant) use a tape recorder. This frees you up to really listen and pay attention to body language so you can ask sensible follow-up questions and be sensitive to the informant's comfort levels. You may want to make notes of things you want to ask later, like the spelling of a name, that would break the flow if asked immediately. Try to keep the questions as uncomplicated as possible. I have seen an interview described as a 'considerately directed monologue' and I think that is a good goal.

If the informant gives me the option, I try to choose the venue that they will find most comfortable and frequently that is the kitchen. If the informant is an older person that you don't know they may be more comfortable if a mutual friend sits in on the interview. Begin with easy questions that the person can comfortably respond to without much effort. This gets the flow going and don't worry if they go off on a tangent from time to time, this can open up new avenues of inquiry.

There are a few pitfalls to watch out for. Some people don't want to admit that there is something they don't know and will creatively answer your question. Others, if they are lonely will be quick to discover what you seem to like to hear and try to keep you there for as long as possible. It is better to set a time limit (an hour and a half max) and try to stick pretty closely to it. At the end of the interview you might want to ask if you could photograph the informant and offer to bring back a copy of the photo. This helps to keep the relationship open and makes it easier if you want to do a follow-up interview.

*After the Interview.* This is the part where most interviewers fall down on the job. As soon as possible, while everything is still fresh in your mind, prepare a written report of the interview. You might want to send a copy of it with the photo to the informant for any corrections or additions and I don't know anyone who has been upset by receiving a written Thank You letter.