



# Living Libraries

Once you're done looking through Mom's attic, you might want to sit down and talk with her. For that matter, if you have any relatives even 20 minutes older than you, stop reading right now and pick up the phone! These people are living libraries. What they can tell you off the top of their heads can shave months off your research time.

You'll want to give some thought to your questions in advance. There are plenty of resources to help you develop a list of likely topics and the more specific you can be, the better. In fact, it sometimes helps to think of a couple of different ways to broach the same subject. Older relatives often take the information that lives in their brains for granted and have a tendency to assume you already know what they know. Out of consideration, they'll try to avoid "boring" you, so you can easily wind up missing all sorts of genealogical gems. Here are a few sample questions to get you started:

1. Where was our family from before they came to America? If you ever met any immigrant relatives, what did they tell you about the "old country"? Was our name changed?
2. Who were a couple of the earliest born relatives that you've known? Maybe a great-grandparent or two? What do you remember about them?
3. What family stories were shared with you by your elders when you were a youngster? What family traditions?
4. How did you meet your husband/wife?
5. Tell me a bit about your work. What was your first job? How did you choose the career path you followed?
6. Were you ever in the military, and if so, can you tell me about your service?
7. Tell me about your parents and siblings.
8. Where have you traveled? Did you ever visit relatives in a place other than where you were raised?
9. What's your earliest memory? Your favorite memory from childhood? One or two of the most memorable days of your life?
10. So many things change over the course of a lifetime. What's the best change since you were a child? The worst?

And you've probably already thought of this, but as long as your relatives are comfortable with your doing so, record your interviews. Video is ideal, but if they're the type who squirms when a camera's present, they're probably not going to open up to you. Audio is less obtrusive, and a useful option for these situations. Recording your talk will free you up to truly listen, ask better questions, and follow up on unexpected nuggets that emerge.

I once captured a conversation with my nana when she was 90 years old. As we often do, I somehow expected her to live forever, but she passed away three months later. As we chatted, I urged her to tell me the family stories I had heard so many times growing up that they almost bored me – you



know, the ones that make everyone groan? When I finally mustered the nerve to listen (it can take a while after losing a loved one), I was stunned by how much my mind had already managed to jumble. I thought I knew these stories by heart, but I already had some of the details wrong – and I was the family historian! You will never regret taking the time to speak with your elders, but there's a very good chance you will eventually regret *not* doing so, so please consider a few chat sessions early in your research process.

*The above is excerpted and adapted from [Who Do You Think You Are](#), companion book to the television series of the same name, by [Megan Smolenyak](#).*