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My History Is America's History

15 Things You Can Do to Save America's Stories

A millennium project of the
National Endowment for the Humanities
in partnership with

The White House Millennium Council

and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, Genealogy.com, PSINet Inc.,
National Association of Broadcasters, U.S. Department of Education, Heritage Preservation,
FamilyFun, and Houghton Mifflin Company

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Recording Family Memories



Any time families gather together is a natural time for sharing family stories. These get-togethers are also the perfect time to secure family stories for future generations by capturing the voices and memories of family members. Interview your relatives, write down their reminiscences yourself, or better yet, record them on audio or videotape. The tapes will also preserve invaluable elements of your narrators - their voices, how they express themselves, who they are.

Sample Interview Questions

Historical Events and Eras

- What is the first historical event you remember?
- What do you remember about the Great Depression?
- How about the years just after World War II?
- What did Great Grandpa do during the Civil War?
- What was daily life like for your mother and grandmother?
- What is your most powerful memory of the 1950s? 1960s? 1970s? 1980s? 1990s?

Your Community

- What was your first job and what was a typical day like at work?
- Who were your neighbors and what do you remember about your neighborhood?
- What was your town like?

Your Family

- What did your parents expect of you (behavior, chores, work, school)?
- What was the best time for you and your family, and what was the roughest time?
- In what ways was your family similar to other families? In what ways were you different?

Oral History for Kids

- Have narrators bring photographs, toys, or other family treasures that might interest children and talk about these during the interview.
- Help kids develop questions that link interviewers and narrators, such as:
 - What was your earliest memory?
 - What was your life like when you were my age?



- What was your favorite book or toy?

- Help young interviewers be sensitive to powerful issues that can come up during an interview, such as the difficult experiences some family members may have had.

Saving Family Treasures

Family treasures link generations in a deep, personal way. Photographs and family papers are often among a family's most treasured items, and audio and videotapes are among the most popular tools for preserving and sharing family history. These tips will help you protect these valuable and often irreplaceable family items for the generations to come:



Photographs and Papers

- Display copies of photographs and papers and store the originals.
- Use acid-free —not magnetic or self-adhesive —photo albums.
- Protect photographs and papers behind glass or acrylic that filters ultraviolet light.
- Use a window mat to keep photographs or paper treasures from touching acrylic or glass when framing.
- Label photographs and papers on the backs of frames or on album or storage pages.
- If necessary, label photographs by writing lightly on the back using a soft, number 2 pencil.
- Shelf small- and medium-sized albums and scrapbooks upright; large ones should be displayed or stored flat.
- Store photographic prints, negatives and slides in a cool, dry, and dark location.
- Photocopy highly acidic news clippings and other yellowed papers onto acid-free paper.
- Consult a conservator about the stability of photographs and papers.

Videotapes and Audiotapes

- Make extra copies of valuable tapes.
- Store copies of treasured tapes in a safe deposit box or with a friend or relative.
- Handle only the cassettes, never the surface of the tapes.
- Use quality audiotapes and videotapes.
- Record videotapes at standard speed (SP not EP) for better images.
- Insert and eject tapes at blank points, and pause them as little as possible.
- Break off the tab on the cassette to prevent recording over important material.
- Keep tapes away from sources of magnetic fields — electric lines, fluorescent lights, electric motors, and magnets.
- Store tapes on end, like books, in labeled, plastic containers.
- Keep tapes in cool, dry areas, away from direct sunlight.

Family History in the Classroom

Family history can provide students of all ages with a personal connection to America's history. Seen through a grandparent's eyes or in an old family photograph, events like the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, or the Civil Rights Movement come to life. Here are some suggested activities for the classroom:



● Historical Moments Interviews

Have students interview family members at home to learn about important events in their family histories and report the findings to other students. Or have the students write essays in the voice of the relative interviewed about a "historical" moment (e.g., grandfather's World War II experiences, grandmother's stories of events during her childhood, a parent's memory of the family's first color television set or the first moon landing, etc.).

● Rites of Passage

Focus a family history project on the adolescence of an earlier generation. Have students interview their parents and/or grandparents about their rites of passage, such as becoming interested in popular music or dances, being allowed to pick out your own wardrobe, learning what it means to be "cool," or going with friends to a movie and other activities.

● Impact of Events

Use family history to help students register the impact of landmark events in American history. For events still in living memory, such as the Great Depression, World War II, the space race, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the movement of women into the workplace, the Gulf War, or other major events, students can interview family members to find out how the event affected their lives.



● Stories that Last a Lifetime

As a supplement to the literature curriculum, have students interview family members to learn about the stories, novels, and poems they have cherished over a lifetime. What made these works especially memorable? What memories are brought back by the thought of first reading them? Encourage students to explore through their interviews the range of responses great writing can evoke. Have students use these interviews to "ghostwrite" book reviews by their family members. Based on these reviews, have the class choose one "family favorite" to read for themselves.

● Auto-biography

Over the past century, the automobile has become a focal point of family life. In most families, taking the wheel of the family car is a much-anticipated rite of passage. Have students explore this aspect of their heritage by creating family auto-biographies, which might include pictures of the cars their ancestors have owned, oral histories of memorable roadtrips, and a comparison of the

automobile's influence on family life across several generations.

Special Note for Teachers

Family history can touch on sensitive and sometimes painful issues. Students who are adopted, whose parents have separated or divorced, or who live in single-parent households may find this an awkward topic. Families who have experienced personal difficulties or devastating losses may feel that their histories are a private matter and inappropriate for classroom discussion. Teachers are advised to anticipate such concerns whenever possible and to respect the privacy of students and their families when such issues arise.

Fun for the Family

● Our Family Quilt

Quilting is an age-old American tradition. Before many states began to keep census records, women wrote in indelible ink the births and deaths of family members onto quilt squares and sewed them together. Today, quilting continues to be a creative expression of personal, family, and community history. You can honor your own clan by asking each family member, young and old, to contribute a square. Your quilt can make a lovely gift to commemorate a birthday, wedding, graduation, or other special event.

● Family History Museum

One great way for kids to investigate their family history is to create a family mini-museum, or "identity box," of prized family mementos. The exhibition hall can be a shoebox, a drawer, or a mantelpiece. Children should gather mementos, family photos, newspaper clippings, special objects, tickets from important events - whatever is meaningful for them - for these splendid museums. When family members gather for reunions or holidays, children can give them tours.

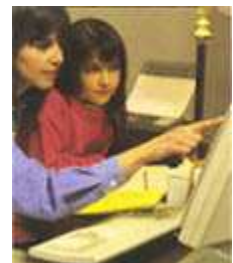
● Millennium Family Portraits

Did you know that in the 19th century, a smile was considered too frivolous an expression for a formal portrait? Or that people sometimes held books to show that they considered themselves educated? Details like these in old family photographs and paintings are clues about your ancestors and their times. How do *you* want to be remembered? Have everyone in the family do a self-portrait and include things that are meaningful to you. Mark on the back of each portrait the artist and the date. You can even get your self-portraits inexpensively framed.



● Digital Scrapbook

Now that families are so computer-savvy, they might enjoy creating a scrapbook about their family history on the World Wide Web. Just about anything can go into your private website: recipes, newspaper clippings, songs, proverbs, riddles, jokes, oral histories, drawings, photos old and new - anything that tells the story of your family.



● Our Family Cookbook

Perhaps the most common, but overlooked, heirlooms in our families are old family recipes. Special dishes can reveal a lot about our places of origin, the American regions we have lived in, and the religions we celebrate. You can collect your family's recipes, organize them in a book along with photographs, and then print copies of the cookbook to share with everyone who contributed.

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Discover your family's history using the My History Guidebook

Traces of family history are everywhere - a diary, an old vase, the memory of a conversation. The **My History Is America's History** guidebook is a toolbox of resources to help you discover these pieces and weave them together into a chronicle of the past.

- See what 15 things you can do to save America's stories.
 - Begin your search with a single photo, letter, or family tale.
 - Care for your family treasures, from videotapes to tableware.
 - Follow other Americans as they discover their family stories.
 - Make family history an adventure for the whole family.
 - Compare stories with long-lost cousins, classmates, neighbors.
 - Locate books and films that help you learn more.
 - Find helpful folks in your community, state, and region.
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Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, NEH supports learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities. NEH grants enrich classroom learning, create and preserve knowledge through research and preservation, and bring ideas to life through public television, radio, new technologies, museum exhibitions, and programs in libraries and other community places.



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