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Preserving Your Ancestral History

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"In all the world and in all time, there isn't anyone exactly like you - with your history, your family, your stories, attitudes, or abilities.

"Your stories are what makes you unique to your family, friends, and the world. Family histories are what draws you together.

"Your family history is like a written memoir, a legacy that serves as a link between the past and the future. By leaving a legacy, you are giving back to life."

One of the ways to get started developing your family story is to begin with interviewing the older members of your family, 50 years or older, be they parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and even older friends of the family. Choose a quiet time, such as after a family dinner. Make sure you won't be disturbed by telephones or other electronic gadgets. Record the interview with sound or video recorders, and/or take notes so that you get all the details and can review them later. Keep the interview no longer than 60 to 90 minutes long.

Use open-ended questions, such as "What was it like when"? As you listen to answers, other questions will come to mind. Ask them. Use memory triggers, such as old photographs, keepsakes, letters, places, and names of deceased family members.

Listen attentively and don't interrupt or correct. Maintain eye contact and show interest by leaning forward or nodding. If someone is talking about a painful experience, show empathy and say, "That's very sad." Expect emotion to be a part of the process.

If a person doesn't want to talk about something, just go on to the next question. An interview shouldn't last more than an hour. People do the best when they're not tired. Thank the person you've interviewed.

Here are some examples of questions to be asked:

Were you born in a hospital, at home, or elsewhere?

Who attended your birth - a physician, a midwife, or some else?

How many brothers or sisters did you have?

What are your first memories?

What kind of toys did you play with?

Did you have grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other relatives living with you or nearby while you were growing up?

Did any non-relative living with you?

What kind of clothes did you wear? Did your parents purchase them or make them?

Were you treated differently from your brothers or sisters, if you had any?

If your parents, grandparents, or ancestors before them came from overseas, what country did they come from? What year?

How important was religion in your family?

What special holidays or events did your family celebrate? Do you recall the people who came on those occasions, how they dressed?

During those special occasions, do you remember what food was served, what prayers were said before the meal, and who was in charge at the table?

Can you remember how the food was prepared? Can you recall how the people at the table acted or dressed?

Did you have a piano or other musical instrument in the house?

What kind of stove did you have? How was the house heated and lighted? Did you have an icebox?

Where did you go to school? Can you recall your teachers and any other incidents at school?

Did your family move while you were growing up and how did you travel to your next house?

How did you spend your summers?

How did you meet your husband or wife?

What do you know about your family surname? Were they ever changed?

What stories, traditions, legends have come down to you about your parents, grandparents, or other ancestors?

Is there a family cemetery or burial plot?

Were your parents active in community life? What responsibilities did that take?

Were there other languages spoken in your home besides English?

What kind of work did you do? How about your grandparents?

Did you bring any photos, mementoes, or other artifacts from your ancestors to show me?

Did you vote in any election for public offices?

On concluding the interview, ask if there are any other statements they would like to make. For example, is there something they would do over again if they had the chance?