

## Family history: How to interview older family members

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STAFF WRITER

**H**olidays are an opportune time for story-telling, because family members across different generations come together. Over Christmas Eve dinner and during gift exchanges, grandparents pass on family lore and traditions to their grandchildren.

Loren Stephens, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and local writer, advocates setting aside even more time to interview older family members and to get their stories on tape and on paper.

Memoirs preserve family culture and give children stronger roots.

"Legacy is so important to grandchildren," says Stephens, who authored her mother's life story. "It's important to the identity of the family."

Stephens, fascinated by her mother's story as a New York socialite who later became an expert in pre-Columbian art, conducted some 10 interviews of two hours each over a period of one and a half years.

"My mother's life story is the story

of the changing role of women in 20th century America," says Stephens. The final product was a finished memoir 199 pages long.

Whether you're writing a book or just want to capture key memories, certain tips create interesting and compelling family histories for future generations to read and treasure.

—**Use a good tape recorder and take notes simultaneously.** During the first interview ask about the chronological history of a person's life. During a follow-up interview, ask about the turning points. How did someone make critical decisions about career choices or marriage?

—**Take special note of elements that make for compelling storytelling.** These include detail, dialogue, drama and depth of feeling. Dialogue breaks up narrative text and makes a story more stimulating. Interesting details could include the clothes one was wearing when they met their future spouse.

Stephens acknowledges that getting to the truth of a person's life can be challenging. Most importantly, try to understand a person's "emotional



**FAMILY MEMOIRS** — Local writer Loren Stephens specializes in the writing of family memoirs.

truth." How did your family member feel about the relationship he or she had with a parent or spouse?

—**Ask about a person's name** ("How'd you get it? Did you like it?"), and different names used during his life and how he felt about it.

A third interview is a good opportunity to ask someone about her heart's desires. What was she hoping for out of life? A memoir allows people to articulate what they stood for during their lives and to express their own personal philosophy.

—**Connect one's life to world events.** While writing her mother's

story, Stephens collected archival information like letters, photographs, diplomas and her mother's wedding invitation. Her mother gave her a copy of a speech given by then-president Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a prayer he recited over the radio.

Compiling a life history, however, comes with many twists and turns. "People's memories don't work in a linear fashion," observes Stephens. "One memory triggers another memory from a different time. People go back and forth in time."

Write the new story, but then gently bring them back to the first memory and ask "And then what happened?" If a person is having memory lapses, ask: "Well, if you did remember, what do you think happened?" You may be able to verify what she says with another relative later on.

—**Be sensitive to family issues.**

"In the process of asking about a life story, some of these family secrets get revealed," Stephens says. Remain calm and neutral. If you know your relative might not actually want the secret in print, respectfully ask his permission and articulate the reasons why you think the story is significant to understanding his life. Still, the relative might decline.

"You have to respect it's their book," says Stephens, who conducts memoir writing workshops and offers additional writing insights on her website [www.writewisdom.com](http://www.writewisdom.com).

Stephens' mother is now blind and suffers from dementia. She is happy that her mother's life story has been preserved. It's also given her a way to be with her mother in her old age. "What gives her pleasure is when I read her memoir to her," says Stephens smiling. ★

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