



# Capturing your family's memories

Wells Fargo Family & Business History Center

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## Eight creative ideas to start recording and sharing

Families often take their foundational history for granted, assuming that stories about their origins, their hard work and perseverance, and periods of financial prosperity and hardship will inevitably be passed down. The same can be true of stories that may influence your family's understanding of wealth and inspire critical conversations around financial planning, philanthropy, and stewardship. However, transmitting these words and this wisdom requires intention and repetition. It also requires a willing storyteller and an engaged listener.

Now is an ideal time to consider embarking on a project to capture a loved one's memories. Recording stories can help ensure permanence and leave a lasting impact. It is nearly impossible to assign a value to a story told in a family member's own words or voice. Creating this treasured keepsake is a gift to yourself and your family for generations to come.

While the desire to record family stories is shared by many, starting such a project can seem daunting. In fact, this may be especially true if you are thinking about capturing a family member's life story, from their childhood to the present. Possible roadblocks can include time, effort, travel, and technological expertise. Here are eight ways to turn your project of saving precious family memories and wishes for the future into a manageable, achievable goal.

What better way to capture yesterday's and today's priceless family stories than in the words and voices of those who remember them best?

## **1. Right-size your project**

Start small by recording a series of short anecdotes. Ask about a single memorable story, reflections prompted by special photographs or an heirloom, or a wish for future generations. This scaled version could be an easy way to get started and build momentum. Or, you may realize that this snapshot approach fulfills your goal.

## **2. Capitalize on family gatherings**

Capture a number of voices in one sitting. If your family regularly gathers for holidays, reunions, or regular foundation meetings, capitalize on the time together to ask a question or two and share reflections. Try something as simple as incorporating family history into a toast or icebreaker activity. While recording a group can introduce unique challenges such as speaking over one another or increased background noise, the rewards can still be immeasurable. Using video might be the right approach under these circumstances.

## **3. Involve others**

Adopting an intergenerational interview model can elicit different answers and perspectives. Enlist an interested grandchild, niece, or nephew to ask questions of a senior member of your family. The project can be further enriched if the interviewer first canvasses other relatives to gain input about favorite stories they most want documented. Involving multiple generations of the family has the potential to enhance already close relationships.

## **4. Make a contribution to history**

Pair with an organization already conducting interviews on related topics. Your family lore might include a story that would be a valuable addition to an existing oral history collection. For example, there are many repositories devoted to stories of veterans and their military service. Other organizations focus on capturing the experiences of those living in specific neighborhoods, leaders or workers in particular industries, civil rights activists, survivors of war or persecution, etc. Such initiatives may provide support to participants and, if you choose, your history can be made available as an educational resource to learners and researchers for years to come.

## **5. Embrace technology**

Leverage one of the many digital devices designed to capture and compile stories. A small hand-held digital recorder will yield higher quality results, if you are able to meet in-person. However, you likely already have basic tools for recording loved ones' voices at your fingertips: a cell phone, tablet, or laptop. When in-person or on the phone with a relative or a larger family group, mobile apps are an easy way to collect and save conversations. If you connect with extended family using a virtual meeting platform, explore whether the recording functionality of the online platform suits your needs.

## **6. Bring in professionals**

Consider hiring experts to complete one or more elements of your family project. In addition to capturing oral and video histories, professionals can also edit your recordings and transcribe the stories told. Some services also specialize in producing documentary films that weave together your family member's voice with related photographs, video clips, historical records, tributes from other family members, and even music. While a significant undertaking, these pieces can be woven together to create a powerful gift that honors an individual's history and legacy.

## **7. Pivot to a written format**

Substitute a pen for a recording device. Many people are hesitant about sharing their stories orally, fearing they will not be able to find the right words or that their personal experiences are not worthy of such an endeavor. A number of these fears may be assuaged by exploring a written alternative like a journal. You can find "guided autobiographies" through online booksellers and local bookstores that direct tentative authors through simple prompts or a fill-in-the-blank format.

## **8. Bring it home**

Think seriously about documenting your own story. We sometimes elevate the importance of others' unique stories and memories, while diminishing the value of our own lived experience. Sharing your successes and challenges when starting a business, as a serial entrepreneur, raising a family, and supporting causes you are passionate about, all make for good stories and teachable moments. Any of the ideas for recording discussed above — a professional, a trusted family member, or an organization — may fit your specific needs.

## The best advice: Get started!

No matter how you choose to proceed, take that first step. We all have a story to tell. However, recording an oral history or writing down our experiences are undertakings that many of us delay. Whatever the format or the extent of your project, there is no better time to preserve your family memories, stories, and lore than today. Look at it as a gift, and take time to enjoy the process and the stories that you capture.

## Sample questions

It can be difficult to know how to begin a conversation. For inspiration, prepare a list of open-ended interview questions or themes. Which subjects are particularly special to your interviewee and could elicit the most vivid memories? If appropriate, close with legacy questions that allow space for sharing hopes for the future.

- What was your childhood like?
- Where is your mother's family from? Your father's?
- Who were your favorite relatives? What memories come to mind when you think of them?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did that person teach you?
- For your descendants listening to or reading this years from now: what would you want them to know?

If needed, assure your family member that there are no right or wrong answers. You are simply interested in his or her unique perspective.

## Do-it-yourself tips

**Who:** When determining who you would like to record, think about your favorite memories or bits of family lore. Is there a natural storyteller in your family or someone you hold particularly dear? Would your efforts be aided by interviewing more than one person? By speaking to more than one family member at the same time, you will likely hear their individual thoughts, as well as their reactions to what others share.

**How:** Using suggestions included here, tailor the project to fit your curiosities and your family's stories. Creatively combine strategies to find the best approach for you. Look also to the resource links on the next page for information about digital recording technology, additional sample questions, and advanced tips from experts in the field.

**When:** Schedule time as soon as you are prepared. Do not risk memory loss or unexpected ill health, if planning to speak with a senior family member. Plan on multiple short sessions, across one or more days as required. And, importantly, be flexible — watch for changes in emotion and energy when in conversation and adjust accordingly.

**Where:** Choose a space that is both comfortable and personal. Try to reduce noise and limit interruptions. Research virtual alternatives, if it would help ease the possible roadblocks of time and distance.



## Additional resources

- StoryCorps ([www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org)) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building connections between people through storytelling. Participants can schedule a time to record a short interview with a loved one at a local or mobile StoryCorps booth or to use the organization's digital app to save your conversation. Note that in addition to receiving a personal copy of your dialogue, a duplicate copy is archived at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress to be preserved permanently.
- Museums and university-level programs dedicated to training professionals in oral history are sources for best practices in the field. They also provide valuable resources for the novice. The Oral History Association maintains a comprehensive list at: <https://www.oralhistory.org/centers-and-collections/>.
- Genealogical websites offer practical tips on conducting oral histories, including basic checklists and step-by-step do-it-yourself guides: [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating\\_Oral\\_Histories](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating_Oral_Histories).
- Reference guides can help walk you through the entire process, from initial planning to execution. Examples include: Cynthia Hart and Lisa Samson, *The Oral History Workshop: Collect and Celebrate the Life Stories of Your Family and Friends* and Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*.

Discover more

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