Family Folklore and Oral History Interviews: Strategies for Introducing a Project to One's Own Relatives

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Because the decade of the seventies witnessed an explosion of interest and research in family studies, more and more university and secondary school teachers in anthropology, sociology, history, and folklore now send their students home to collect family folklore and oral history from members of their own families. Whether the course is introductory or specialized, teachers alike praise the projects because, as Dorothy Levenson attests, students learn that "history is not just something that happens in books—it is life; it is what happened to them yesterday, and to their mothers, fathers, and grandparents before them."[1]

Once again, I would like to thank the members of my family who have given so much, so generously: the late Elmer and Louisa Zwald Keck, Bertha Davidheiser and the late Isaac Yocom, Emma and the late Albert Ray Yocom, The Rev. Harold and Martha Keck Fry, Norman and Betty Keck Yocom, William and Gladys Yocom Metka, Randall and Edith Yocom Boyer, and David and Marie Yocom.

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Finally, the use of the pronoun "she" throughout this paper does not imply that only women conduct family fieldwork. I use it here as a universal pronoun much more comfortable to myself as the author.

1. Dorothy Levenson and others, "Family History Projects are in Schools Coast to Coast," *New England Social Studies Bulletin* 35 (1977-78): 8-14.

Such projects are heralded also because the subject matter seems both easily available and problem-free; students will be working with their own relatives, after all, and not with strangers they would have to seek out. And such personal-family fieldwork, as some researchers have said, is "ready-made" for students.[2] It can be collected "with relative ease," and each generation produces a "few raconteurs" who can be "found and encouraged to talk, sometimes into microphones."[3] Gaining access to informants will be easy because family and relatives are "invariably flattered at this show of attention from the younger generation."[4] After all, concludes one last researcher, students are going into their family, not the "field."[5]

Yet as sociologists and historians point out, problems can arise when interviewers try to go home again. "Reconstruction of the family history," as Judith Worth warns, "is a high-risk endeavor for which few students, parents, or teachers are prepared."[6]

Having assigned personal-family interviews and used such data in his own research, historian Kirk Jeffrey cautions that the

> assignment to "write a social history of your own family" or to "write a biography of a grandparent" can galvanize a student to heroic industry and creativity but also bring him or her face-to-face with complex and often disheartening problems.[7]

Of his own experience in the classroom, he explains, "I had expected that the parents and other relatives consulted by my students would be pleased to be asked about the history of the family. Most of them were, though some have been indifferent and a few downright hostile. A student," he continues,

> may come from a family which has moved about frequently and cut itself off from all but its very recent past. Another's family may harbor

2. Jan Harold Brunvand, *A Guide for Collectors of Folklore in Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1971), 8.

3. Mody C. Boatright, "The Family Saga as a Form of Folklore," in *The Family Saga and Others Phases of American Folklore*, by Mody C. Boatright, Robert B. Downs, and John T. Flanagan (Urbana, 1958), 19.

4. Richard M. Dorson, *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States* (Chicago, 1964), 18.

5. Brunvand, *A Guide*, 11.

6. Judith Worth, "The Use of the Family in History," *New England Social Studies Bulletin* 34 (1976–77): 19–22.

7. Kirk Jeffrey, "Write a History of Your Own Family: Further Observations and Suggestions for Instructors," *The History Teacher* 7 (1974): 366.

> some embarrassment or family conflict which nobody wishes to discuss as was the case with a student of mine who had two murderers in the family one generation back. For still another student, the history of the family might be marked by great poverty and unhappiness so that his parents or grandparents are reluctant to talk.[8]

Sociologist Marvin Koller, writing about multigenerational analysis, discusses research that students conducted with data from their own families. He asked his classes to prepare a kinship network by drawing five concentric circles that represent the degree of closeness to the author, "ego," and placing within the circles a symbol for any person who "ego" holds as significant to his or her life. "The assignment," he admits,

> turned out to be a most unhappy experience for those students whose generational backgrounds were filled with struggle, degradation, anxiety, and other psychiatric dilemmas. One of the most dramatic and unintentional results was the case of a young female student who literally was tearing her hair by the roots in her agonized recollection of family incidents far back in her past.[9]

Certainly, personal-family research lies somewhere between hair-pulling and heaven, but many problems do arise because professionals continue to treat personal-family fieldwork as if it were ideal for the untrained. Lulled by this comfortable assumption and unaware of evidence that suggests a need for careful preparation, too few scholars have sought for or discussed methodology especially suited for those who want to study their own families—and all this at a time when fieldwork guides with methodologies specific to the needs of ethnic and occupational groups have appeared.[10]

Although some guides for family fieldwork exist, few go beyond basic interview guidelines, suggestions about historical records, and lists of interview questions to discuss the characteristics specific to

8. Jeffrey, 369 and 366.

9. Marvin R. Koller, *Families: A Multigenerational Approach* (New York, 1974), 290.

10. For fieldwork guides with group-specific methodologies, see Phyllis Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America: A Handbook* (1938; rpt. New York, 1969); Brenda B. Johns and Alonzo N. Smith, *Black Oral History in Nebraska: A Handbook for Researchers and Students of Oral Traditions in Black Communities* (Omaha, 1980); and Robert H. Byington, "Strategies for Collecting Occupational Folklife in Contemporary Urban/Industrial Contexts," in *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, ed. Robert Byington, *Smithsonian Folklife Studies* 3 (1978): 43–56.

personal-family research or to suggest resolutions to common problems.[11] Best of all the guides because of its family focus and its brief discussion of some personal-family fieldwork issues is the chapter in *A Celebration of American Family Folklore: Tales and Traditions from the Smithsonian Collection* entitled "How to Collect Your Own Family Folklore."[12] In addition, Kyvig and Marty's *Your Family History: A Handbook for Research and Writing* does discuss problems in writing a history paper filled with personal-family data, and several other sources detail family circumstances that often lead to difficulties in research.[13] Most writers, however, fail to offer any resolutions to fieldwork problems beside avoidance or retreat. Sociologist Lewis Coser, for example, recommends that students who are deeply troubled by their families should use literature about families—novels, short stories, and poetry—instead of interviewing their relatives.[14] For historian Jeffrey, the difficulties that students encounter are to be discussed as problems of the historical craft.[15] For anyone interested in successfully interviewing relatives, these suggestions offer little help.

The most pressing needs of personal-family fieldwork research are not descriptions of alternatives, but, rather, discussions about how best to prepare a fieldworker to interview family members and to solve the problems specific to interviewing at home. Because many of these problems have to do with the family's understanding of and acceptance of a project, one of the best ways to deal with potential difficulties is to forestall them by carefully preparing for a crucial, though often ignored, aspect of personal family fieldwork: introducing the project to the family. Although some of the works mentioned above do suggest brief, overall guidelines to personal-family

11. Some guides for family fieldwork are Janice Dixon and Dora Flack, *Preserving Your Past; A Painless Guide to Writing Your Autobiography and Family History* (Garden City, New York, 1977); Ellen R. Epstein and Rona Mendelsohn, *Record and Remember: Tracing Your Roots Through Oral History* (New York, 1978); Gary L. Shumway and William G. Hartley, *An Oral History Primer* (Salt Lake City, 1973); and Jim Watts and Allen F. Davis, *Generations: Your Family in Modern American History* (New York, 1974).

12. Eds. Steven Zeitlin, Amy Kotkin, Holly Cutting-Baker (New York, 1982).

13. David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Your Family History: A Handbook for Research and Writing* (Arlington Heights, Illinois, 1978). See Worth, "The Use of the Family in History"; Jeffrey, "Write a History"; and Koller, *Families* for discussions of family circumstances that often lead to research difficulties.

14. Koller, *Families*, 291-292.

15. Jeffrey, "Write a History," 369.

fieldworkers, none discuss in detail the strategies for introducing a project to one's own relatives as this paper does.[16]

"I don't know why I feel so nervous about this project. I just can't get myself to begin," one of my family folklore students told me. Actually, she had good reason to feel hesitant. She desperately wanted her project to go well, she wanted her relatives to agree to help her, and she feared—for a variety of reasons—that they would refuse her. And, if they said no, she reasoned, her chances of finding out about her past would evaporate. She also began to realize how strange it would be to go home as a researcher and not just as a daughter. Thus, she was already experiencing some of the most unsettling anxieties inherent in introducing her project to her family.

Introducing a project to the family is the biggest emotional hurdle for a fieldworker. All the fears and doubts intensify as she lays bare her plans in front of her relatives. The moment is highly charged—dreaded, yet desired—because its successful completion heralds the beginning of exciting times: the interviews. A fieldworker worries because she knows the introduction often decides whether or not the project will proceed and then sets the tone for the fieldwork relationship with the family. Chances are that a fieldworker has gone over and over the scenario in her mind: one tableau has her relatives smiling, gladly nodding as they listen to her requests; in another they sit stonily silent, mumbling something about being too busy.

The most costly mistake a fieldworker could make would be to assume that the family—because they are her family—understands her purposes after only a few words pass between them. A good introduction should initiate a full discussion of the project: what the fieldworker wants to learn; what parts the family will play in the interviews, research, and editing; what people she will interview; how she plans to deal with sensitive family matters; and what she plans to do with the material. If a fieldworker prepares for the introduction, her fears will lessen and her chances for success, multiply.

Before even thinking about what words to use, she should consider three issues: (1) What does she already know about her

16. A detailed discussion of all the problems—and solutions—specific to family folklore is beyond the scope of this paper. Other suggestions may be found in my "Fieldwork in Family Folklore and Oral History: A Study in Methodology" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1980).

family that would help her anticipate her family's reaction to her proposal? (2) How does her family react when she initiates discussion of the past and asks casually if the family has ever thought about preserving their past? (3) When she requests the family's help, should she speak to her relatives as a whole or to small family groups and individuals?

First, by asking herself questions about her family's behavior, a fieldworker can begin to see how willing her family might be to help her. Does the family enjoy visiting relatives? Do they plan many family gatherings? During family get-togethers, do they talk about events and people from the family's past? Do they value learning and formal education? Have they helped with school assignments and special projects? Do they enjoy the attention of younger family members? Do they have opinions about a range of topics that they like others to listen to? Would they enjoy having a pamphlet or book or photo essay about the family's history? If a fieldworker can answer yes to many of these questions, she already has several indications of family support as well as a few ways to introduce her project.

Some families, however, may be leery of—if not hostile to—a project. Only on *The Brady Bunch*, *Eight is Enough*, *The Jeffersons* and other television shows do relatives end up loving and agreeing with each other after sixty minutes together. Most families on the other side of the TV screen have reasons why they might not want anyone to question them about the past. For example, do some family members dislike or bitterly argue with each other? Would some like to know the secrets of others? Do some relatives describe others as making more money than anyone else in the family? Have there been major quarrels, inheritance battles, or trouble over illegitimate children and less-than-nine-month babies? If a fieldworker must answer yes to any of these questions, she knows that her family may withhold immediate support unless, in her introduction, she successfully reassures them.

Second, a fieldworker might test the family's possible reaction to a project by making some remarks comparable to, but more informal than, a request for help. She might, for example, initiate a discussion of the family's past and, after a time, remark to the speaker, "You know, somebody should write that down." For me, such a comment elicited quite different reactions from two of my grandparents. My maternal grandfather replied, "You know, I suppose I have done

some pretty interesting things. I should have written a book.''[17] A fieldworker could not ask for a more willing informant. My paternal grandmother, however, replied, ''No, no, no,'' to a similar probe.[18] Thus, I knew I had to frame my requests to each of them in very different ways.

Finally, a fieldworker should consider whether she wants to speak to the family as a whole or to small family groups and individuals. If she discusses her project with the entire family at a gathering like a birthday dinner, for example, the atmosphere of celebration and conviviality may encourage relatives to lend their support, but she will have less time to share many details of the project.

Approaching family members as individuals and couples, either after a brief announcement at a family gathering or as the first contact, benefits a fieldworker more because she has time to answer questions, calm fears, and clear up misunderstandings immediately. In addition, if she anticipates different responses from different relatives, she can tailor her explanation of the project to each relative's situation. Also, because she has the time to listen, a fieldworker may hear some family material right after she asks for help. Although this immediate outpouring of information usually indicates that the relative enjoys sharing family traditions to an interested listener, it can be a sign of nervousness about his part in the project. By reciting a few details, he either is hoping that he has satisfied the fieldworker or is checking to see if he knows the kind of information she wants. Since she has time, the fieldworker can handle any qualms or questions that accompany such a spontaneous offering of family material.

After considering these issues, what can a fieldworker say as she introduces her project to her relatives? Although no fieldwork guidelines come with absolute guarantees, the following recommendations, based on my fieldwork and on that of other personal-family fieldworkers, present a range of valuable possibilities. A fieldworker will not need to use them all; with her knowledge of her family, she can choose the ones which will serve her best.

1. *Give family members a clear idea of the project.*

A fieldworker first needs to describe her project to her relatives and, thus, give them a confusion-free picture of some of the events

17. Conversation with Elmer C. Keck, July 1975.
18. Journal II, 73–77, 14 July 1975.

that will follow. Although such a description should initiate discussions on several issues, it need not be a lengthy monologue.

A. *Focus of research.* Does a fieldworker want to learn how the family lived through the depression of the 1930s or does she want to learn everything the family knows about their history, from the earliest remembered relative to the present? Whatever her interest, she should mention the major questions she wants to explore and, then, some of the topics within those questions. If her project will cover the entire family history, for example, she could explain that she wants to know such topics as how the family celebrated holidays during different periods, what community or church activities various relatives participated in, what memorable incidents happened to family members as they grew up, and what relatives' first jobs were like. She might also mention topics that especially interest her relatives.

By listing these few topics, a fieldworker also assures relatives that they know the answers without having to prepare because she will be asking about things that they have done themselves. Such assurance is vital since relatives may hesitate to help with a family project if they think they may not be able to answer a fieldworker's questions. A few sample questions—"When you were a child, what were mealtimes like?" "What kinds of things did you do on the Fourth of July?"—also help relatives understand the type of information a fieldworker wants and to see themselves as capable helpers.

B. *Skeletons in and out of the closet.* How to get relatives to talk about sensitive issues is not the first question a fieldworker should ask herself as she prepares her introduction. She should first consider why she feels she needs to learn about these issues and, then, what she plans to do with this information after she collects it. As she decides, she should remember that family secrets are usually revealed to her because she is a relative and not because she is a fieldworker.

A fieldworker must understand that asking the family to talk about skeletons is to ignore the usual ways that families use these skeletons. Some skeletons, of course, are far from secret: present-day murder, theft, or children born out-of-wedlock are known to all. But the more private indiscretions of the present and any questionable act of the past are shared selectively as one relative tells another who can benefit from the information (details about contraception, abortion, or divorce, for example) or who can sympathize or, unfortunately, who enjoys revelling in the misfortune of others. Some

secrets are shared with younger family members at times the family deems fitting; after their marriage, for example, a young couple often learns of the marital difficulties other relatives have had. Family members, then, share much orally, but are naturally hesitant to be the ones responsible for setting private information into the rather unforgiving medium of print.

With these ideas in mind, a fieldworker who wants to explore sensitive family issues may try several strategies. She may want to explain that in addition to joyful events she also hopes to learn about some of the difficult times like those caused by unemployment or death because such events show how the family survived in spite of the odds. If she presents these sometimes upsetting or embarrassing times in the positive light of family survival, she may be able to persuade hesitant relatives to help.

Mention of specific family skeletons, however, has no place in an introduction unless a fieldworker knows that the family will refuse to cooperate unless they can discuss how the upsetting event will be handled. She may assure her family that she has not come to expose them by asking about the event, that whether or not they want to talk about it is their choice. Or, if discussing the event is crucial to her, she may offer her interviews as a chance to right any misunderstandings or to present family opinions since young family members may hear about the event and never get a chance to know the family's point of view.

A general statement, though, may do. A fieldworker may want to reassure her family that she has not come to badger them about any topic they do not want to discuss and that any relative is, of course, free to refuse to talk about any such subject with her. She must emphasize that she has not come to cause bad feelings or stir up gossip, but to learn about her family's history and traditions.

In any case, she should hold her questions about sensitive subjects until her interviews have been underway for some time and her relatives are comfortable with the project. By that time, some skeletons usually emerge anyway.

No matter how many or how few family secrets a fieldworker uncovers, she must let relatives know that she will respect their privacy. Should, for example, a relative say something he does not want others to hear, she must promise to erase the information from the tape and to keep the details to herself. Also, she could promise to go over the transcripts and check for sensitive material before anyone

reads them. And, finally, she may assure relatives that she will talk with them before she publishes any family material.

C. *Methods of research.* A fieldworker may share some or all of her research plans with her family: library research, genealogical research, visits to museums, and interviews with family and friends. Because her family may be unfamiliar with the interviewing process, she may want to explain that an interview is like a visit or a conversation with one or more relatives and friends. During the time together, she will ask questions, listen to anything relatives wish to say, and encourage them to tell her what they would like to talk about. So she will not forget what they say, she will either take notes on or tape-record the conversation. (With those more hesitant family members, she may want to wait until the first interview to discuss a tape-recorder.)

Regardless of how much genealogical research a fieldworker plans to do, she may very well want to compare her project with genealogy because to many family members, the word "genealogy" is a familiar and respected one. In fact, no matter how a fieldworker describes her research project, many relatives will immediately interpret it as genealogy and begin talking about the furthest back person they know. When I asked Martha Keck Fry to help me, for example, she agreed and then replied,

> Martha: I guess your Poppop [grandfather] has already told you about the first Kecks who came over, the way the story goes, at least.
> Peggy: No, he hasn't.
> Martha: Really? Well, yes. There were three brothers, one settled here, one around Pittsburgh, and one further along—maybe Indiana. We have a book that tells about the Kecks and when they came over.[19]

Thus, if a fieldworker introduces her project as one "like genealogy," relatives will often welcome her work, especially if she promises to distribute family tree charts to all. And describing a project in genealogical terms is neither dishonest nor limiting. Genealogists ask many of the same questions folklorists and historians do, and it seems fitting for all involved to move from genealogy to other

19. Journal IV, 61, 9 May 1976.

questions that draw forth oral history and folklore. For example, just a minute after Martha told me that she did not know what she knew other than genealogy, my comment about her being much younger than her brother elicited a family narrative from her:

> Yes, well, I went away to college in 1925 . . . I went off to college knowing that my Dad had cancer. That wasn't easy. And in my dorm, you couldn't get any phone calls except emergencies after 8. If the phone rang after 8, I'd be terrified. I couldn't study. . . . But I learned to overcome this fear gradually. This experience always stayed with me in many other situations. You can't let fear cripple you.[20]

D. *Materials.* Discussing family possessions that a fieldworker would like to see often makes a project immediately understandable. Family Bibles; essays, poems, and stories by relatives; handiwork of all sorts from carvings to gardens to quilts; scrapbooks; favorite possessions; collections; and old family houses, graveyards, and churches might whet the appetite of family members who would love to talk about and show her these things that resonate for them. Likewise, family members usually receive requests to look at photographs with joy because they like to talk about their pictures. She should reassure family members that she can make copies of anything she would like to use, however, for relatives may hesitate to show her an especially treasured photograph if they think she wants it for herself.

Asking for copies of legal papers can be more difficult. Because documents such as wills, property settlements, and divorce decrees often bring painful and bitter memories and because some reveal the financial status of a relative (a subject long taboo in many families), a fieldworker may wait until the project is well underway to mention her interest in these items.

E. *Plans for using the collected family folklore and oral history.* A fieldworker may want to mention a few very different ways that she and the family might use the material she collects: quotations for holiday greeting cards, a photograph album of family history, a short story, a paper or book about the family's folklore and/or history, a film, an article for the local newspaper, a popular magazine, or an academic journal. Her list should not be overly long or it could alarm some

20. Journal IV, 61, 9 May 1976.

family members who may see their private lives becoming too public.

She may want to discuss the family's role in editing and agreeing to the publication of these materials. For example, if she plans to ask family members to read over any item before it is distributed throughout the family or beyond, she should say so.

As she discusses plans for using her family's history and traditions, a fieldworker could show her relatives examples of works that other individuals and families have already produced. William Owen's narration of his family's journey from seventeenth-century England to present-day Texas or the autobiographies of Maya Angelou and Harry Crews represent book length applications of personal-family research and recollection.[21] Local libraries or friends of the family may have family history or genealogy books that a fieldworker could use. She may also want to mention the family folklore articles by Kim Garrett and Kathryn Morgan; the first gives examples of folklore from Garrett's family, and the second explains how Morgan's family uses stories of their brave and daring great grandmother, once a slave, to support and strengthen their family.[22] Finally, two collections of photographs and stories gathered by Smithsonian researchers show what a family can do.[23]

2. *Emphasize the historical importance of a family's experiences.*

When I asked my parents if I could stay with them for several months while I collected our family's history and traditions my father replied, "Sure, but will they—the school—let you do your dissertation on something like that? Our family? Who'd want to read about us?"[24] Because most Americans see themselves neither

21. William A. Owens, *A Fair and Happy Land* (New York, 1975); Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York, 1969); and Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place* (New York, 1978).

22. Kim S. Garrett, "Family Stories and Sayings," in *Singers and Storytellers*, ed. Mody C. Boatright, 30 (Dallas, 1961), 273-281. Kathryn L. Morgan, "Caddy Buffers: Legends of a Middle-Class Negro Family in Philadelphia," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973), 595-610.

23. Steven Zeitlin, Sandra Gross, and Holly Cutting-Baker, *I'd Like to Think They Were Pirates* (Washington, D.C., 1975) and Holly Cutting-Baker et al., *Family Folklore* (Washington, D.C., 1976).

24. Conversation, Norman D. Yocom, November 1976. My use of "tradition" instead of "folklore" here is purposeful. "Traditions," with its positive connotations, will help more than "folklore," which often conjures up visions of the odd, the superstitious, and, often, the backward.

as storehouses of valuable information about the past nor as integral participants in history, many relatives, surprised and puzzled by the request, will ask, "Why us?"

Most Americans think of history in terms of great white men—military leaders, legendary fighters, presidents—people who flash across their television screens and parade by on the covers of their newspapers and magazines and whose actions and decisions seem to control their lives. The history of closer, more accessible people and geographical areas has been either eliminated or de-emphasized: secondary schools teach state history irregularly and touch on local history only around centennial times. Education's disregard for local ethnic cultures and languages further weakens people's awareness of their own place in history.

To some extent, *Roots*, the fictionalized history of Alex Haley's Afro-American family, presented one of the most exciting examples of the power of history close to home. In January of 1977, 130 million Americans—85% of all television-equipped households—watched either some or all of the eight parts of the docu-drama.[25] While the series, through the Kinte family, taught, like nothing else before it, what being black in America meant, it also provided an alluring vision of what dedicated family research through folklore, oral history, and genealogy could do. Bewitched by the possibilities, Americans of all races deluged the National Archives for genealogical details. In January of 1977, mailed requests for information increased 70%; and, in February of 1979 when ABC aired *Roots* again, requests jumped 100%.[26] Haley's impassioned plea at the end of his 1979 broadcast imploring families to search for and record their history hit its mark.

But *Roots* does not spur all families to study their past. For some the family in *Roots*—and, to some extent, the family in *Holocaust*, television's presentation of Nazi Germany's Jewish slaughter—have so much history, so many compelling and important events to report that any other family's stories grow dim in comparison. "Our family has nothing like *Roots*," several families sighed when I explained my own project. And, writing about the same response, Ruth Garvey, in her humorous essay "Digging Up Roots Led the Author to Some Dirt That'll Never Make a Miniseries," confesses:

25. Harry Waters, "After Haley's Comet," *Newsweek*, 14 February 1977, 492.
26. John Carmody, "The TV Column," in *The Washington Post*, 6 March 1979, B-6.

> I should like to report that I am a child of love, born to a Rhodes scholar who, summering in Cheboksary, capital of the Chuvash Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, fell in love and married a lady underground worker whom he spied through an open manhole cover. I should like to report it, but I can't, since I was born on Harlem Avenue in Baltimore, Maryland. . . . Both grandfathers fought in the Civil War—one on each side. The Yankee got the grippe and was shipped home for good a month after joining up. The other one was caught on his first day out and spent the rest of the war on a tiny island near Detroit. They paraded every year thereafter and were generals when they died, each over 90. Nothing much here, except I came from long-lived lucky grandfathers.[27]

Although the mention of *Roots* may help relatives understand the value of a family project, a fieldworker needs to recognize the complex response that the series sometimes produces. Thus, because many Americans do feel so alienated from both television's highly dramatic docu-drama families and history's march of events, family members may well need to be shown the rich knowledge they possess.

To help family see their experiences as historically valuable, a fieldworker could point out items in the family's past that relatives might recognize as important. National events like World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, and family members' parts in them, make especially good examples: Who served in the wars? What was life like for those at home? How was the family affected by the flu epidemic after World War I? The family's roles in these and other national events provide a flurry of details that relatives often accept as historical and, thus, suitable for a fieldworker to collect.

A fieldworker could also explain that historians write history by using details that families talk about and record in Bibles, journals, and letters: What countries did relatives come from? Where did they settle? What occupations did they follow or learn? Did they live close to one another? Whom did they marry and how many children did they have? Historical accounts like Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach's work on an American factory city, *Amoskeag*, depend heavily on family members who will answer such questions.[28]

Finally, a fieldworker needs to stress the importance of recording the history of everyday life. Families readily agree that the total story

27. *TV Guide*, 30 April 1977, 25-26.
28. *Amoskeag; Life and Work in an American Factory City* (New York, 1978).

of a nation's life cannot be written with accounts of politics, wars, and national leaders alone. Information about work, church, amusements, school, family life, and celebrations is needed to complete the tale: What did children do to amuse themselves? What chores were they expected to do at what ages? How did the family celebrate birthdays, if they did? A fieldworker must help the family understand they have much vital information to share.

3. *Stress that only family members know the needed information.*

Relatives may initially recoil from a project not only because they feel alienated from history, but also because they feel inadequate to report on their own history. Some revere the word "History" and understand it to mean not what they remember, but the truth as gleaned from written documents. Family members may benefit from knowing that oral history produces, through interviews, oral documents that can also contribute to the record of the past, and that "truth," a relative concept in any discipline, is best approached with as many different kinds of documents as possible.

As a fieldworker introduces her project, then, she should emphasize that no written documents provide the information about her family's life the way they themselves can. They and only they, she must stress, can be her teachers.

4. *Emphasize the personal value of the family's experiences.*

If a personal-family fieldworker wants to discover and preserve a heritage she values, she should tell family members so, in detail, because she cannot assume that all family members understand and share her feelings about the importance of family traditions. Perhaps she wants to learn about the family's history to get a sense of her own place in time? Or, maybe she wants to be able to tell her children about the family. She may want to learn from the difficulties others overcame or to find out what it was like to grow up in earlier generations. Whatever she says to her family, she should give reasons that will make sense to her and to them. By pointing out and discussing some of the family stories she already knows, she can help her relatives understand why she values the discovery and preservation of family traditions and, perhaps, encourage them to feel the same way.

5. *Appeal to relatives' favorite topics of interest and values.*

As a fieldworker discusses what an interview may be like, she can also mention that she plans to ask about some of her relatives' favorite topics, for example, how things (school, work, church, transportation, amusements, gift-giving, children's attitude toward parents) have changed.

Influential life experiences also spell out areas that relatives may want to tell others about. Often, each generation experiences one significant event that becomes a reference point for all other life activities. Whether World War I, the Depression, World War II, the civil rights struggle, the death of the President, or the turbulence of the Vietnam War era, the experience shapes their decisions and their values. Relatives often want to say many things about an experience that they believed transformed their lives.

A fieldworker may also want to show her willingness to discuss how relatives came to hold particular values, even though she may be opening herself up for a bit—or a barrage—of sermonizing. The formation of such values often proceeds from events that provide historical detail, and the principles themselves often teach how to interpret the information and traditions gathered in the interviews.

My grandfather Elmer Keck, for example, takes great pride in his ability to remember, a value that he loves both to demonstrate and talk about. Here, as he helps me with the names of his countless aunts, uncles, and cousins, he flexes his exacting memory:

Peggy: And Hen and Bill, and Mary, and Edna?
Elmer: Oh, he had a flock. They had a lot of children.
Peggy: Oh, more than those three?
Elmer: Oh, yes! The oldest was Warren. And then was Emma, and then was Elsie, and then was Bill-William, and then was Lottie, and then was Herbert, and then was Henry, and then was Ralph, and then was Edna, and then was Mary.
Peggy: My word!
Elmer: How many *is* that?
Peggy: You weren't joking. Ten! Did they have any that died?
Elmer: Yes, they had one that died, too, in there. Now I think I got them all. There was Warren, and Emma—now you check—there was Warren, and Emma, and Elsie, and Bill, and Lottie, and Herb, and Henry, and Edna, and Mary.
Peggy: Right.

Elmer: And there was one that—in between them—one in there that died. But I'll tell you, I can take Elsie: she was Mrs. Hendricks. Richard and Mark and Evelyn, Hendrickses had three children. And Evelyn, she's married. They have those big orchards up there outside of Reading, you know, just this side of Leesport. Ontelaunee, the Ontelaunee Orchards. That's my cousin.[29]

Recounting his early school experiences, he shows his concern for the development of memory skills as he stresses his lessons in mental arithmetic:

> And then we'd have something which they don't have today: mental arithmetic.
>
> You have mental arithmetic books with questions in there and you'd learn these things. And then you'd get up in the class, and the teacher would fire this question at you and if you'd know it, it would go off like that (clicks fingers). From memory, you know . . . and you'd have them in your memory.
>
> And that's why I think we remember things today more so than what the kids do today because they weren't taught that kind of a lesson.[30]

According to Elmer's daughter, Betty, he wanted his children to get the same advantages from mental arithmetic that he felt he had received, so he drilled them at home:

> We'd just do it at the table, maybe a little while afterwards it would go, maybe five or ten minutes after supper. We would say, "Oh, we have our 2 times tables today" or "We have up to our 5 times tables in school. Would you hear us?"
>
> Well, see, then he would rattle it off . . . He'd say "What's 2 times 4?" Then he'd go: "3 times 6? 4 times 8?" see? And he thought that as soon as he was done giving 2 times 3 you should give him 6.[31]

But remembering relatives and figuring out math problems in his head are more than points of pride for Elmer. As a man who was 88 years old in 1981, he feels that memory work, long a part of his early life, is now a necessity. When asked if he felt differently about himself now that he was older, he replied, "No," but added,

29. Interview with Elmer C. Keck, 18 May 1976.
30. Interview with Elmer C. Keck, 18 February 1976.
31. Interview with Betty Keck Yocom, 25 February 1976.

> I think it's more of a matter of keeping your faculties active. You mind [i.e., "take care"] that you keep it your thoughts on an even keel, you know. You can't go off on a tangent sometimes and then expect to come back again. You've got to have an even trend of thought all the way through life. And you have to have your firm ideas and live up to them. Because I, you know as well as I, I do my daily crossword puzzles as much as I can without help before I'll turn to a book to do anything.[32]

Elmer's daily crossword puzzles, his frequent quizzing of his grandchildren on state capitals, and his constant recitation of family genealogy show him to be a man who not only values his memory and mental abilities but who also believes them to be synonymous with life, itself. A relative like Elmer Keck, then, who treasures memory, may well be interested in a family project if a fieldworker explains that her fieldwork will give him the chance to recite events out of his remembered past.

6. *A fieldworker can compare herself to the family's traditional historian(s).*

Although a fieldworker may be the first to tape-record and write the history of her family, she is probably not the first to take an interest in her family's past. If she does not know about anyone in the family who liked to talk about older relatives or who recited the names, dates, and burial places of family members, she should ask. Knowing about such a traditional family historian is important not just for the facts she might learn, but also for the automatic role she stands to inherit. If she compares herself to this earlier historian, she will be able to explain her project in a way that will fit into the life of the family.

Family members may not call such a relative a "genealogist" or a "family historian"; they, like Elmer Keck, may have terms of their own:

> Uncle Bill, he looked back. He was the youngest. He used to reminisce, you know, get nosey ["Nosey" here has no negative implications. Elmer was laughing, and used a word he thought would carry the humor along.] and ask Hen [Henry, Bill's older brother] questions. And Hen would say, "I'll take you around and show you where the graves are."[33]

32. Interview with Elmer C. Keck, 28 April 1976.
33. Journal II, 109, 27 July 1975; Journal, 17 and 23 October 1979.

And even if relatives describe someone as a genealogist, they, again like Elmer Keck, may use the term to refer to an activity that differs from researching written documents and constructing family trees:

> But Hen, he dug back. A genealogist. He was the second oldest. He knew some of the family's back history. There was a fellow on Fourth Street, and they got together and talked about their families: where they came from, where they were buried.
>
> He never wrote anything down; he kept it in his head.[34]

Relatives may also say, "Oh, it's too bad so-and-so isn't alive today. You would really have enjoyed talking to him. He was a great talker." Usually such a "talker" was also a traditional family historian. Bertha Davidheiser Yocom's comments show her father-in-law, Albert Yocom, as a potential family historian:

> He was a great talker. He got up and gave a speech at his and his wife's 55th wedding anniversary in Shenkel Church. Oh, yes, it was nothing for him to do that. Then they asked her. "No," she said, "I'm a poor talker. I've let Albert do the talking."
>
> He was always a great talker. . . . When he was in company with anyone, he would always hold his own.[35]

And Ray Yocom's information about Albert (his father) backs up Bertha's report. After Ray described where to find the nineteenth-century Yoder-Yocom tombstones, he stressed:

> I'm about the only one who knows it, too . . . because Dad [Albert] did. Well, he kind of took pride in those things. He showed me them tombstones several times already.[36]

All of the stories that Ray told about past relatives, like Levi, who returned from the Civil War only to die in a fall in the barn, came from his father, Albert.

Being able to recognize Albert Yocom and Hen Keck as traditional family historians significantly helped my research because I knew to focus on them and their stories. And I could also compare my interest in family history with theirs.

34. Journal II, 109, 27 July 1975; Journal, 17 and 23 October 1979.
35. Interview with Bertha D. Yocom, 14 April 1976.
36. Interview with Albert Ray Yocom, 10 June 1976.

7. *Point out that most relatives engage naturally in family interviewing.*

Although family members may see one relative as a special keeper of family information, in some sense every family member naturally and regularly engages in the historical process. Not only do relatives talk about their own lives within the family, but they also question each other about the past during the course of everyday conversation. In other words, they often act as their own interviewers.

One April noon-time, for example, as Elmer Keck, his daughter Betty Keck Yocom, and I (Betty's daughter) ate sandwiches and soup together, Elmer and Betty talked of the local accidents they read about earlier that morning in the town newspaper. After agreeing that the Hoffman whose kerosene lamp exploded inside his home was not the Hoffman Elmer knew, Betty pointed to the obituary column and asked, "Do you know this Robert Pennypacker that died?"

Elmer: No.
Betty: Well, do you know his wife and Esther? They used to live up here, or maybe her parents do, on Sixth or Seventh Street? Nester?
Elmer: What? The Rufus Nesters?
Betty: Did they have any children?
Elmer: Well, I don't know.
Betty: Wait, I think she was the only child, wasn't she—Catherine Nester?
Elmer: Well, how old was this Pennypacker?
Betty: Well, my age. He's David's [Elmer's son's] age.
Elmer: Yeah, well, Rufus is my age.
Betty: She lived up there on Sixth or Seventh Street, this Nester.
Elmer: Well, that's Rufus Nester. And I saw him up in the Reading Hospital the other day.
Betty: Well, yes! Well, then you would because that's where his son-in-law was.
Elmer: Yeah, I saw Rufus up in the hospital.
Betty: Well, that was his son-in-law then.
Elmer: Oh.
Betty: See, he died up there in the Reading Hospital yesterday. See? And his sister, this Pennypacker that died, is Mrs. Bitler. Mr. Bitler's wife was a Pennypacker and a sister to this Bob that died.
Peggy: Mr. Bitler, my teacher?

Betty: Yeah, in sixth grade.
Elmer: This Rufus Nester, we're related in a round about way. Way round about way!
Betty: Um humm. [Nods in agreement.]
Peggy: How so?
Elmer: Rufus Nester's mother and Mrs. Nagle—
Betty: Who's she? Who's Mrs. Nagle?
Elmer: Well, the Nagle boys over in Boyertown—there was Warry and Bill, and, uh, Warry and Billy and Eddie and—What was the other's name? And there was one daughter, and she lived on Philadelphia Avenue, yet. And one of the boys is living yet . . . the youngest one of them, see? And they lived in Gilbertsville. See, the Nesters had half of the double and Nagles had the other half of the double, and the two women were related, you see. Mrs. Nagle and Mrs. Nester were sisters. And Mr. Nagle is related in some way to Dad [Elmer's father], see? [Laughing.]
Betty: Oh, boy!
Peggy: Boy, that is a round about way.
Elmer: And we used to visit the Nagles and the Nesters when we'd go to Gilbertsville to visit Grandpop Christman. We'd be up at Nagles playing with these boys, see? Warry and Bill and Eddie and—
Betty: Well, Warren Nagle, is that the one that used to live on Third Street?
Elmer: No, no.
Betty: Oh.
Elmer: And this Rufus Nester, then. See, he was the only boy in the Nester family, but they had girls. But Rufus would be playing with us, with the Nagle boys and me. I think he is, if I'm mistaken, isn't he sexton at Zion's?
Betty: I don't know, Dad. I'll have to ask Betty Leister.
Elmer: I think he is. At least, I know he works around the church.
Betty: Well, Pennypackers went to Zion's Church.
Elmer: Did they? Well, he's Reformed, too, because he works around the church there. And I was surprised to see him around the Reading Hospital the other day![37]

A fieldworker can remind her relatives, then, that asking questions about the family's past is not some strange and wondrously new phenomenon, but rather a practice that they began themselves generations before and that she would merely like to continue.

37. Interview with Elmer C. Keck and Betty Keck Yocom, 28 April 1976.

8. *Encourage relatives to admit that they have thought about asking questions and collecting family history themselves.*

Family members are often very curious about events in their own history, but for lack of time or the "right time" or because they do not want to appear nosey, they seldom ask questions and preserve the answers. When I told David Yocom about my project, for example, and mentioned that I'd like to talk with him about his experiences and those of his mother, father, and grandparents, he nodded his head:

> Boy, there's a lot. You know Dad worked in Philadelphia for a number of years as a coachman for a family, like a chauffeur, I guess, then in a feed mill. But when he lived on which farm, I don't know. Do you know if he worked on the farm before he bought it?

After asking me if I were going to write down or tape-record what I learned from everyone, he leaned toward me: "You'll find out a lot. You know, you just go on with your own life unless someone stops to ask those questions."[38]

Many family members, at one time or another, have thought about questioning their relatives. As my great uncle Ray Yocom confessed, "Oh, I could have—if I'd have it to do over again, I would have took a lot of stuff down, but I wasn't interested you know. It was old stuff to you and you were just growing up."[39] Thus, a fieldworker should remind or ask relatives about the questions they have and encourage them to see that they are just as curious about their past as she is.

9. *Encourage the family to participate in the project.*

To interest relatives in a project from the start, a fieldworker can ask family members how they think she ought to proceed: who would be especially good to interview, who might be a bit hesitant, and what topics to be sure to ask about. In this way, she will not only gain valuable help, but she will also encourage relatives to see this project as everyone's and not just hers alone.

A fieldworker who asks her relatives for suggestions, though, must be sure she can gently turn aside any proposal she deems unwise.

38. Journal III, 105-106, 11 April 1976.
39. Interview with Albert Ray Yocom, 10 June 1976.

10. *Discuss the growth of family studies.*

Finally, many relatives, especially those interested in educational issues, may be more willing to help if a fieldworker shows them, using some of the following details, that family studies is a growing area of research within several disciplines, especially folklore and history.[40]

In folklore, L. Karen Baldwin's 1975 dissertation on the family group as the social base of folklore[41] as well as the Family Folklore section of the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife and its publications[42] inspired additional family folklore research.[43] The decade of the seventies also saw the publication of several book-length studies on the history of the American family as well as the first American social history text to devote a chapter to the family.[44]

Professors at many American universities now offer advanced courses in family folklore, history, and sociology and use family materials to introduce basic principles of their disciplines in their freshman and sophomore level courses.[45] And students in such courses can do more than take their family research papers home. They can deposit them in the archives that their professors have set up or they can send them to a national archives for family projects—the Anonymous Families History Project at the University of Minnesota where scholars read and learn from their research.

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40. See David Kyvig, "Family History: New Opportunities for Archivists," *The American Archivist* 38 (1975): 509-519 and Tamara Hareven, "The History of the Family as an Interdisciplinary Field," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 399-434.

41. L. Karen Baldwin, "Down on Bugger Run: Family Group and the Social Base of Folklore" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1975).

42. Steven Zeitlin, Sandra Gross, and Holly Cutting-Baker, *I'd Like to Think They Were Pirates* (Washington, D.C., 1975); Holly Cutting-Baker, et al., *Family Folklore* (Washington, D.C., 1976); and Holly Cutting-Baker, Amy Kotkin, and Margaret Yocom, *Family Folklore; Interviewing Guide and Questionnaire* (Washington, D.C., 1978).

43. See, for example, Steven Joel Zeitlin, "Americans Imagine Their Ancestors: Family Stories as a Folklore Genre" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1978); Amanda Dargan, "Family Identity and the Social Use of Folklore; A South Carolina Family Tradition" (Master's Thesis, Univ. of Newfoundland, 1978); Margaret Rose Yocom, "Fieldwork in Family Folklore and Oral History: A Study in Methodology" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Massachusetts, 1980); and Steven Zeitlin, Amy Kotkin, and Holly Cutting-Baker, eds., *A Celebration of American Family Folklore: Tales and Traditions from the Smithsonian Collection* (New York, 1982).

44. See references in Tamara Hareven, "The History of the Family as an Interdisciplinary Field," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 399-400.

45. For an example of family history in an introductory history course, see David Culbert, "Undergraduates as Historians: Family History Projects Add Meaning to an Introductory Survey," *The History Teacher* 7 (1973): 7-17.

Although these suggestions are many, their number does not mean that introducing a project to a family is an impossibly arduous one. Crucial, yes. Uncomfortable, maybe. A fieldworker, after all, is asking her relatives to give her quite a lot of themselves; it is only normal that she feel a bit uneasy about her request. But asking relatives to help recreate the traditions and the history of her family may also be one of the most rewarding parts of the fieldwork project. In any case, these many suggestions indicate variety, not difficulty.

And, along with additional recommendations as inquiry into personal-family fieldwork continues, these methods should make family projects less risky and more enjoyable for the fieldworker who goes home again, prepared.

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