

A Family History Questionnaire

by Virginia Allee

Introduction

The purpose of this questionnaire is to provide you with a mind jogger to help you in making notes on your own life or to guide you in recording the life experiences of another member of your family. The information you record will become an important link between you and your descendants. It will serve as a means of conveying a picture of what your life has been like and a sense of what has been important to you.

At the top of a sheet of paper write:

- The full name, date and place of birth of yourself.
- The full name, date and place of birth of your mother (maiden name) and the full name, date and place of birth of your father.
- The full name, date and place of birth of your brothers and sisters (with spouses' names).
- The full name, date and place of birth of your children (with spouses' names).

Write your thought on sheets of good quality paper numbering each answer to correspond to the appropriate question. Write your name on each sheet, too, and leave room to add new thoughts later.

Read only a few questions ahead or you will never get started. Combine questions if you wish and skip those that do not seem to apply to you or that you cannot or choose not to answer. And answer any additional questions that occur to you.

Do not start out trying to produce a finished composition; just let your memories flow naturally. Later, you or perhaps your child or great-grandchild can edit it. Right now you are simply gathering the all-important facts and memories.

Work for short periods of time. You can continue your answers at odd moments or you can stop to ponder or discuss them. But spend your time writing rather than rereading your earlier answers or slow progress may discourage you.

You might want to compose your answers as though you are writing a letter to your family—to people you know and love—for that is essentially what you are doing. Start out with something like this: *You and I are of the same blood. I want you to know something about me and our family. I was born July 10, 1921, in the town of....* After that, the rest is easy.

Grandparents

1. What were the names of your mother's parents?
2. When and where were they born? Where did they live?
3. What did he and/or she do for a living?
4. Do you have any personal memories of them? Describe.
5. What were the names of your father's parents?
6. When and where were they born? Where did they live?
7. What did he and/or she do for a living?
8. Do you have any personal memories of them? Describe.
9. Did you know your grandparents well?
10. What do you remember hearing about your great grandparents?
11. Did you ever meet them?
12. Did your great-grandparents, grandparents or parents come to the U.S. from a foreign country? What stories are told in your family about their journey? Do you have any relatives in foreign countries?
13. What traditions are still practiced in your family?

Childhood: The Family Home

1. What type of house did you live in as a child? Describe.
2. What other buildings were on the same property?
3. Did you have a yard? A fence? A swing? Flowers? Trees? A lawn?
4. As a child, did you have a room of your own, or did you share it with someone else? If so, whom?
5. Did you have a bed of your own?
6. In what room did you eat? Kitchen? Dining room?
7. Where did you eat when there was company?
8. Did your house have a parlor? Was the family allowed to use it?
9. How was your home heated? Was it warm in winter? Explain.
10. Did you have a fireplace?
11. What kind of kitchen stove did your parents cook on?
12. Did you burn wood? Coal?
13. Did you have to buy the fuel or was there a choice, such as cutting wood, with which you had to help?
14. Where did your family get water? Was it plentiful? What methods were used to conserve water?
15. Did your family always have a refrigerator? If not, what did you use instead? When did you get a refrigerator?
16. Did your family have a cellar? Where did you store apples, potatoes? Canned foods?
17. Did you always have indoor plumbing? If not, when did you get it?
18. Did you always have electricity? If not, when did you get it?
19. Did you ever use candles or kerosene lamps? Whose job was it to fill the lamps and replace the wicks?
20. If you moved during your childhood, tell where and when and what you can remember of each house and the family circumstances and reason for the move.

Family Relations: Responsibilities and Conditions

1. What was your position in the family? Oldest? Youngest? Were there any advantages? Disadvantages?
2. What were your duties as a small child? Describe your responsibilities as you grew older.
3. Who cooked the meals? Who did the ironing?
4. Did you buy or make your own clothing? Who was the family seamstress? Who repaired the family shoes?
5. When did you learn to cook? Who taught you?
6. Did you learn how to sew? Crochet? Knit? Embroider? Who taught you?
7. Did you ever learn the mechanics of a car? Who taught you?
8. Did your parents keep in touch with distant family?
9. Did you visit relatives often? Near? Far?
10. How did you get your mail? How often?
11. Did you have any childhood diseases?
12. What do you remember about family pets?
13. Were you especially close to anyone in the family?
14. How did the family spend its evenings?

Family Income and Livelihood

1. What did your father do for a living?
2. What did your mother do for a living?
3. Did you contribute to the family income?
4. Did you get any allowance as a child? Or did you have to earn your own spending money? If so, how?
5. When did you get your first job outside of the family?
6. Did your family have a garden? For family use or profit?
7. Who did the planting? Digging? Cultivating? Weeding? Watering?
8. What kind of vegetables did you grow? Who harvested them?
9. Did your family have fruit trees?
10. Who did the canning and what vegetables and fruits were canned? How?
11. If you lived on a farm, what crops were planted?
12. Who did the work? Family? Hired Hands? On what occasions?
13. Did you raise hogs or chickens? Cows?
14. What kind of meat did you eat? How often? Did you slaughter your own animals? How often?
15. Did you keep a cow for milk?
16. Did you make your own butter? Cheese?

Days, Seasons, and Special Occasions

1. What did Saturday mean to you?
2. Was Saturday night bath night?
3. Did you have special shopping habits at during the holidays? Did you earn your own money to buy presents?
4. What winter holidays did your family celebrate: Christmas? Hanukkah? Kwanza? Something else? How did you spend the holidays? Describe. Did you decorate? Did you exchange gifts?
5. What kind of gifts did you receive for the holidays?
6. What did Sunday mean to you?
7. Did you attend a weekly religious service? Alone? With your parents or family or friends?
8. Where did you attend a religious service?
9. Did your family observe Easter? In what way?
10. How did you observe the Fourth of July? Where?
11. How was your birthday celebrated? Did you have a birthday cake?
12. What kinds of gifts did you receive on your birthday?
13. Did your family entertain often? What were the occasions?
14. Did your family attend picnics? Family reunions? What do you remember about them?
15. How did you keep cool in the summer?
16. Did you go barefoot in summer?
17. What did you wear in winter to keep warm?
18. Do you remember any blizzards or tornadoes or floods?
19. How did these events affect the neighbors, relatives, or town? How did they affect you?

Friends and Games

1. What did you do for recreation?
2. Did you or your brothers or sisters have any hobbies? If so, what?
3. Who were your playmates?
4. Who was your best friend?
5. What did you and your friends do when you got together?
6. Did you and your playmates play any organized games? Football? Baseball? Hockey? Kick the can? Describe.
7. Did you ever learn how to swim? Where?
8. Did you ever attend a taffy pull? Pop corn?
9. Did you participate in 4-H or scouting organizations?

School

1. Where did you go to school?
2. Did you ever attend a one room school? Describe.
3. How did you get to school? If you walked, how far?
4. What do you remember about these walks? Did you walk alone or with friends? Did you encounter animals that you befriended or that frightened you?
5. Were these walks a hardship in winter? In summer or hot weather?
6. How large was your school in the elementary grades, first through fourth? First through eighth? Eighth through twelfth?
7. What recreation was provided or allowed during periods of rest or recess?
8. Were you helped by older students or did you help others with their lessons?
9. What kinds of grades did you get? What were your favorite subjects? Who were your favorite teachers?

Transportation and Surroundings

1. Describe the size of the town where you lived or shopped.
2. Where did your parents shop?
3. How large or how small were the stores?
4. If you lived in a small town or on the farm, did you ever go to the city to shop? Describe.
5. What was the largest town you remember visiting when you were young? What did you do there?
6. Did you ever travel on a train while you were young? What was the occasion? Where did you go and with whom?
7. Were you ever away from home as a child?
8. Did you or your family own a horse? A buggy? Were you able or allowed to ride?
9. When did your family acquire its first car? What make? How much did it cost?
10. When did you learn to drive a car? Who taught you?
11. Where did your family go on vacations?

Outlook

1. Whom did you most admire when you were young? Within the family? Within public life? Why?
2. Did you choose someone to pattern your life after? Who and why?
3. When you were small, what did you hope to do when you grew up?

Higher Education and Career

1. What education did you get past high school?
2. When did you finally settle into your career?
3. Did your family support, oppose, or encourage you?
4. While you were in college or in training, did you live away from home? For how long?
5. Who influenced you most and helped you to develop your skills?
6. How many different employers have you worked for? What promotions have you received?
7. Would you choose the same career if you had it to do over?

Marriage and Later Life

1. When and where did you meet your husband or wife?
2. How and when did you get engaged? Married?
3. Where did you marry and who was present?
4. Did you go on a honeymoon?
5. Where was your first home?
6. What is your spouse's occupation?
7. How many moves have you made during your married life? Where and why?
8. Where and when were your children born?
9. What can you remember of their baby days and childhood?
10. Did you or your spouse go into military service?
11. If your spouse went into service, what did you do while he or she was away? Where did you live?
12. What memories do you have of war years?
13. Have you been politically active during your lifetime?
14. Which political party or parties did you belong to and why?
15. Which presidents have you voted for and why?
16. How has your health been through the years?
17. Did you have animals or pets or recreational equipment?
18. Who have been your closest friends through the years?
19. To what organizations have you belonged?

Philosophy and Outlook

1. Do you have a philosophy of life to share with your descendants?
2. Do you have a favorite philosopher, teacher or writer who best expresses your philosophy?
3. Do you have religious leanings or strong religious beliefs?
4. What are your favorite religious passages?
5. What do you have to say about all the changes that have taken place within your lifetime?
 - a. The proliferation of consumer goods? Freezers? Dishwashers? Dryers? Electric stoves? TV sets? Radios? Cars? Power tools?
 - b. The changes in men's and women's fashions?
 - c. The revolution in transportation and communication?
 - d. The struggle for the political and civil equality of minorities and women?
 - e. The technological breakthroughs in industry, medicine and space exploration?
6. In your opinion, which have been the greatest advances or inventions of all?
7. What things have given you the most pleasure or satisfaction? Your family, home, career, possessions, hobbies? Man's increased mobility and knowledge concerning himself, the world, and the universe? The hope for improved race relations and for world peace?
8. Is there anything that has caused you perpetual concern? What events or trends have disturbed you most in your lifetime?
9. What things do you fear most in regard to future generations? Where are the greatest inherent dangers?
10. How would you encourage or counsel future generations on the following:
 - a. Marriage and the home?
 - b. Obligations to country and society?
 - c. Traits such as honesty, humility, perseverance, diligence, thrift, loyalty, reverence, kindness, faith?
 - d. Care of body, mind and health?

11. What has been your experience in regard to the following:

- a. Answers to prayers?
- b. Necessity and power of love?
- c. Will power as opposed to being ruled by one's feelings?
- d. ESP
- e. Inner peace and tranquility?

12. What do you consider to have been your most important advancements?

Checklist: Be Sure You Include the Following Information

1. Your birth date, place, parents, surrounding circumstances and conditions.
2. Your brothers' and sisters' names, dates of birth, dates and places of marriage, spouses' names and children.
3. Your marriage: To whom, when and where.
4. Family moves: When, where and why?
5. Your career: Training for your job, promotions, employers you worked for, salaries, associates, achievements.

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