

By Wayne Halm

The Situation

Like most people I have older people around. Now I like to consider myself a fairly clever guy, but these folks know all kinds of things that I don't know. They have insights into things that have simply never occurred to me. They know about an incredible world separated from mine only by time. They know things about me that I have forgotten. Someday all of this will be lost unless I do something about it.

The Basic Idea

To capture this knowledge about events and ideas of the past I suggest recording interviews with the older folks. The interviews themselves are an enjoyable activity for both parties, and can be most enlightening for the interviewer. In years to come the tapes will make wonderful presents to the relatives of the older folks.

Execution

There is nothing particularly high tech or expensive about this idea -- the only things required are a tape recorder, a quiet comfortable place, and a game plan.

Tape recorders, while not as common as cell phones are simpler to operate and cheaper. Nothing "high end" is required, I saw one a while back for \$19.95 -- or just borrow one from the younger folks.

A quiet comfortable place for the interviews is needed. The interviewee's home will usually work nicely, there they will be at ease and surrounded by things that will spur their memory.

An interview plan is also needed. The plan is a starting point and a direction. It is intended to help the conversation along, not to guide it. Some suggestions follow:

- Schedule the interviews - let the interviewee know what you are trying to do and if they agree schedule about one hour a day for two or three weeks.

- Basics are a good place to start - begin by asking about some obvious major events to create a chronological framework. Places lived, schools attended, job held, children born, marriages, etc. - that sort of thing.
- Build on previous interviews - between interviews listen to the previous tape and form questions for the next interview. Have six or eight ready, but if only two or three are used that's okay.
- Let the interviewee determine the topic and depth - once they are talking, let them talk. Don't pressure them for uncomfortable details. Get what you can and be happy.
- Don't be pushed into video - keep the words of the interviewee the center of attention. A video camera adds complexity to the situation, it has an intimidation factor, it is distracting, and it really adds nothing to the resulting story.
- Keep the interviews light and cheerful - cover sad topics but don't dwell upon them. Stress happy events.

Above all Else

Start now! Nobody is getting any younger. When I think of all of the things I have already lost . . . well, it's sad.

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