

Dakota Memories Oral History Project Interview Questions

Introductory Remarks and Questions Specialized Oral History Techniques

1) The Yearly Round

- This seasonal approach is appropriate for interviewing rural people.
- The general idea is to prompt the narrator to recount a year of life in terms of seasonal activities.
- **NOTE:** Don't use this too early in the interview. First, establish a rapport.
- **METHOD:** Determine the period (childhood years). Tell the narrator your selected period (childhood years). Then ask when, considering seasonal activities and their rhythms, the year began. Prompt the narrator to proceed through the year, expanding on activities in each season, moving forward as discussion of each is exhausted.
- This technique is very useful when interviewing members of the same family or community. The narratives can be compared, contrasted, or integrated.

2) The Memory Map

- This technique is particularly effective with narrators in whose lives specific places and spatial relationships appear to have been important.
- Use of the memory mapping technique is participated when in the course of an interview the interviewer senses its potential.
- **Method:** The researcher must be prepared to produce a sketchpad and pencils for the narrator's use (In some cases it may be necessary for the interviewer to sketch for the informant). Continue the interview as the mapping is being done. Encourage the narrator to talk about what they are sketching and determine the time and situation they are sketching. The interviewer should use the map as a prompt for the recollection of descriptions and events associated with the objects depicted. KEEP THE MAP.

3) The Cemetery/Landmark Walk

4) The Family Album

Introductory Remarks and Questions

Introductory Remarks

Today is _____ (date).

I am _____ (name of interviewer).

It is a pleasure to conduct this interview for the Dakota Memories Oral History Project in
_____ (city, state).

Introductory Questions

Can you please state your full name (including maiden name)?

When and where were you born?

Have you ever heard an interesting story about your birth? If so, please share it with us.

Was a midwife or doctor present? Please elaborate on this.

Please share some of your earliest memories with us.

Environment

- What was it like growing up on the plains?
- What did you find beautiful and/or enjoyable about growing up on the plains?
- What did you find bleak and/or unpleasant about growing up on the plains?
- What were winters like?
- Please describe a typical fall.
- What were summers like?
- Please describe a typical spring.
- What was your favorite season? Why?

Family - Grandparents

Start with the narrator's paternal grandparents. Ask them the questions. Then go back to the beginning, and ask the questions about the narrator's maternal grandparents.

- Please tell me about your grandparents.
- What were their names? Please spell them for us.
- What type of person was your grandmother?
- What type of person was your grandfather?
- Did your grandparents come over from Russia? If so, where did they come from, and where did they settle?
- Did they ever share with you any stories about Russia, their voyage to the US, or their journey to across the US to the Great Plains? If so, please share them with us.
- Where did they live when you were growing up?
- What did they do for a living when you were growing up?

- How often did you visit with your grandparents?
- Did you ever stay with them?
- Were your grandparents religious? Please elaborate.
- How many children did they have?
- Were there any other relatives of the older generations in your family (great-uncles and aunts) that you were close to? If so, please tell us more about them and their role in your life.
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your grandparents or others from their generation?

Family - Extended Family -- *Uncles, Aunts, Cousins, etc.*

- Please tell me about your uncles and aunts.
- Where did they live when you were growing up?
- How often did they visit?
- Who was your favorite aunt/uncle? Will you please tell me more about him/her?
- Please tell me about your cousins.
- How often did you see them?
- Who was your favorite cousin? Please tell me about him/her.
- Please tell me about any large family gatherings.
- How did the families stay in touch with each other?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your extended family members?

Family - Parents -- *Father*

- Please tell us about your father
- Where and when was he born?
- How did your father express his emotions, such as fear, love, and anger?
- Describe your relationship with your father.
- What was his profession?
- How did your father cope during hard times?
- When, where, and how did your father die?

Family - Parents -- *Mother*

- Please tell us about your mother.
- Where and when was she born?

- How did she express her emotions, such as fear, love, and anger?
- Describe your relationship with your mother.
- What was her profession?
- How did she cope during hard times?
- When, where, and how did she die?

Family - Parents -- *Father & Mother*

- How many children did they have?
- Who was the strict parent -- your mother or father?
- How would they discipline the children?
- Who influenced your life more -- your mother or your father? How so?
- How did your parents meet?
- How long were they married?
- Please describe their marriage.
- What types of things did your parents do for pastimes?
- Were your parents involved in politics when you were a child? If so, please tell us about it.
- Do you have anything else you would like to add about your parents?

Family - Siblings

- Please tell me the birth order of your siblings.
- Tell me about your brothers and sisters.
- Where and when were they born?
- Was anyone present at their births?
- Please share any interesting stories about their births.
- Growing up how did the children get along with each other?
- Was there any competition in your family?
- What type of mischief did the children get into?
- Which brother/sister were you closest to? Please describe your relationship.
- What was it like when a new baby came into the home?
- What was it like when your brothers and sisters left home?

- Did your siblings have nicknames? If so, please share them with us. What are the stories behind the nicknames?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your brothers and sisters?

Family - Only Child

- Please tell us what it was like growing up an only child?
- Why didn't your parents have anymore children?
- Did you want a brother or sister?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about growing up as an only child?

Play

- What type of activities did you partake in for fun?
- What games/activities did you play inside?
- What games/activities did you play outside?
- Where did you learn how to play these games/activities?
- How did the weather influence the games/activities you played?
- Do you remember playing any games/activities that your parents/grandparents learned to play while they were living in Russia?
- What type of toys did you play with as a child? Were they store-bought or homemade? Do you still have any of your childhood toys? (If so, can we take a picture of them?)
- Who did you play with?
- Did your mother and father play with you?
- Where was your favorite place to play? Why?
- Did you ever play with the farm animals? How so?
- Did you go hunting as a child? If so, please tell us about it.
- Did you go trapping as a child? If so, please tell us about it.
- Did you go fishing as a child? If so, please tell us about it.
- Did you have any favorite rhymes or sayings? Can you please share them with us?
- Please tell me about any superstitions or scary stories you grew up with?
- What were your favorite songs as a child? Will you sing one of them?
- Did anyone in your family sing or play musical instruments? Please tell us more about this.
- Were you encouraged to play an instrument? Why?

- Did you take lessons or were you self-taught? Can you read music?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your childhood pastimes?

Grade School

- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- Where did you go to school? Was this a one-room school house?.
- How did you get to school? How long did it take you to get to school?
- What were your schools like? (Size of classrooms, # of teachers per school, supplies, etc.)
- What was the composition of the school population? (Males to females, other ethnic groups?)
- Did your teachers treat children from different social backgrounds or ethnicity differently?
- Did children treat other children from different social or ethnic backgrounds differently?
- Please describe the attendance situation in your school.
- At times, did you have to stay home to help with work?
- What is your favorite memory about going to school?
- What subjects were you taught?
- Were you a good student
- Did you have homework? Please describe it.
- Did you parents and/or siblings help you with your homework? Explain.
- What books did you read at school? Home?
- Did you get into trouble at school? If yes, how were you disciplined?
- What language did you speak in school? Could you speak German? Was it hard learning English? During recess or noon hour did children speak German or English? Did you help teach your parents English?
- What did you take for lunch? And, how did you take your lunch to school?
- Did you change country schools or go to a town school? If so, what were some of the differences between the schools? Which school did you like better – the town school or country school? Why?
- Do you remember your teachers? How often did you get a new teacher? Were the teachers male or female, young or old? Please tell me about them.
- What social activities were allowed during "recess" and "noon-hour"?
- Did your schools have parties to celebrate the holidays, such as Halloween, Christmas, and Valentine's Day? Please describe these occasions.
- Were you encouraged or discouraged from going to high school? Why?

- How important was getting an education to you family?

Chores

- Please tell us about the chores you did as a child.
- Who did what around the house: the cooking/cleaning/washing/etc.?
- Did you help around the house? How so?
- Did you help care for your family's garden? How so?
- Did your brothers and sisters help around the house or care for the garden?
- Did your father help with the household tasks? If so, how?
- How would your family do laundry when you were growing up? Where did you hang the clothes in the winter? How often did your family do the laundry? How would you iron clothes?
- What were some of your outside chores?
- Did your mother work out in the fields or outside the home when you were growing up? What did she do? How often?
- Which chores did you enjoy, and which chores did you dislike?
- Were there differences between winter chores and summer chores? If so, please tell us what the differences were.
- Were you ever hired out to work for a neighbor or relative? If so, please tell us about this experience.

Daily Life - Family Home

- Please tell me about the house you grew up in? How many rooms did it have? Where did you all sleep in the house? What was the furniture like? How long did your family reside in this house? Who lived in your home when you were growing up?
- If your family moved, where, when, and why did they move?
- How did your family keep the house warm in the winters? How did your family keep the house cool in the summers?
- How often would your family entertain guests in your home? Please tell us what it was like when your parents entertained guests.
- What language did you speak at home? Were you allowed to speak English at home? How did your family feel about speaking English?
- Where did you go to the bathroom? Please describe this building (location, toiletries, etc.).
- Please tell us about baths. How often would you take a bath? Did you make your own soap? How did you heat the water? How often did you change the water?

- How often were you supposed to brush your teeth? How often did you brush your teeth?
- Did your mother have a garden? Please tell us about it.

Daily Life - Food

- Who usually prepared the meals in your family?
- Where were the meals usually prepared? What about during the summer months?
- Where did you store food to keep it cool during the summer?
- Did boys help in the kitchen? If so, please tell us more about their roles.
- How would your family have their meals? Would you always sit at a table together? Were there assigned seats? Were you allowed to talk?
- What types of food did your family usually eat?
- What were some of your favorite meals?
- What were some of your least favorite meals?
- What were the traditional German dishes that you had growing up?
- Did your family make ice cream? How would you do this?
- Did your family do their own canning, butchering, and/or sausage smoking? If so, please tell us more about the processes.
- What was your family's attitude toward alcohol? How often did people drink alcohol when you were growing up?
- Did your family make their own root beer, beer, wine, or liquor? If so, please tell us more about the processes.

Daily Life - Clothing

- What type of clothes were common when you were growing up?
- Were your clothes store-bought or home-made?
- If you had store-bought clothes, where would your parents get your clothes? Stores or catalogs? How often did you get new clothes?
- If you had home-made clothes, who made them for you? Where did he/she get the material? Did he/she ever reuse old clothes to make new clothes?
- Did you ever have to wear hand-me-down clothes?
- Did anyone in your family sew, embroider, or quilt? Please tell us a little about this.
- How often did you get new shoes? How many pair of shoes did you have as a child?

Daily Life - Technology

- When did your family get electricity? How did this change your life?
- When did your family get its first car or truck? How did this change your family's life?
- When did your family get a telephone? How did this change your life?
- How important was the radio in your family? What were some radio programs that your family listened to often?

Farm Life

- Describe the homestead/farmstead you grew up on.
- Where was the closest town?
- Did you ever experience isolation? If so, please tell us about this experience.
- How did your family gain possession of the land – did they inherit it, buy it, etc.?
- Was your family "grain farmers", "ranchers", dairy farmers, or diversified?
- What buildings were on your parent's farm? What were they used for?
- What type of animals did your family have? What were they used for?
- Did your family butcher these animals? Please tell me about it.
- Describe the roads to your farm?
- What type of farming equipment did your family have?
- Please describe the fields and crops on your family's farm?
- Do you remember your neighbors? Who were they? How close did they live to your farm? Did they ever look after the children, while your parents were away? If so, did they ever discipline you?
- Was "neighboring" a common practice when you were growing up? If so, please explain.
- What were the farm kids' feelings toward the town kids?
- What was your family's attitude toward town people?
- What were the positive aspects of growing up on a farm? How about the negative ones?
- What social classes existed when you were growing up? What social class did your family belong to?
- What ethnic groups were included in your community?
- What was your family's attitude toward different ethnic groups, such as Norwegians or Scandinavians?
- Were there places that your parents wouldn't let you go or children they wouldn't let you socialize with? If yes, why?

Town Life

- Describe the town you grew up in.

- Who founded the town?
- What was the population when you were growing up?
- What is the present population?
- What businesses were there in town?
- How many churches were in your town?
- What denominations were they?
- Who were your neighbors? How close did they live to your family? Did they ever look after you? If you stepped out of line, would they discipline you?
- What social classes existed when you were growing up?
- What social class did your family belong to?
- Were there other ethnic groups in the town you grew up in? If so, what ethnic groups?
- What was your family's attitude toward different ethnic groups, such as Norwegians or Scandinavians?
- Which ethnic groups were rich, and which were poor?
- What were the town kids' feelings toward the farm kids?
- What about the relationship between town adults and farm adults?
- Describe a typical Saturday night in your town?
- What were the positive aspects of growing up in a small town? How about the negative ones?
- Describe some of the "characters" you remember in your town.
- Were there places your parents wouldn't let you go to or children they would not let you socialize with? If yes, why?

Religion

- How important was religion during your childhood?
- How often did your family attend church?
- What denomination were you raised?
- What church did your family attend?
- Please tell us about the seating arrangements.
- What were some of the religious activities that you participated in while you were growing up?
- Were you baptized and/or confirmed? If so, please tell me about it.
- Did your family have a celebration after your confirmation? If so, please tell us about it.

- Were you able to question religious teachings?
- What did your parents restrict because of religion?
- Was Sunday dinner or supper different from other days of the week? If so, how?
- What was the typical meal for a church celebration?
- Where was the nearest church?
- Was the German language used in church worships and prayers?
- How did your family respond and react toward death?
- Please describe a typical funeral.
- How did your family view other faiths?

Holidays & Celebrations

- What was your favorite holiday? Please describe it.
- Did your family celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas? If so, please describe the location, people, food, gifts, and games.
- Did your family celebrate Easter? If so, please describe the location, people, food, gifts, and games.
- Did your family celebrate the 4th of July? If so, please describe the location, people, food, gifts, and games.
- Did your family celebrate birthdays? If so, please describe the location, people, food, gifts, and games.
- Did your family celebrate names-day of your saint? If so, please describe the location, people, food, gifts, and entertainment.
- Did your family participate in sausage parties, communal butchering, or quilting parties? If so, please tell me about them.
- Please tell us about any other holidays that your family partook in during your childhood, such as Halloween or New Years.

Youth Activities & Dating

- What types of pastime activities did you participate in during your teenage years?
- Were you involved in any sports and/or clubs? If so, please elaborate.
- What were some of your favorite radio programs?
- Did you go to the movies? If so, please share your memories. What type of movies did you see? How often? Who went with you?
- How old were you when you started dating?
- How are the customs of courtship different than they are today?

- Describe a typical date.
- During your young adult years, did you ever attend parties? Describe this occasion.
- Did you go dancing? If so, describe the occasion.
- Who attended these dances - young people, older couples and/or families?
- What day were these dances typically held on?
- What was the attitude of the older generation towards dance halls?
- Was there a community-meeting place for people to socialize, whether in town or someone's farm or school?
- How and what did you learn about married life? From parents?
- Do you remember your parent's attitudes toward sex?
- How would they have reacted to premarital sex?
- Did they ever offer you advice on sex or relationships?
- Who did you go to if you needed that kind of advice?

High School

- Please tell us about your experiences in high school.
- How old were you when you started high school?
- Where did you attend high school?
- Did you have to board in town? Please tell us about this experience.
- Please tell us about the transition from grade school to high school. Was it hard? Did a lot change?
- What classes did you take?
- What was the school like – class size, teacher to student ration, supplies, rooms, etc.?
- What was the composition of the school population – males to females, ethnic groups, etc.?
- Did teacher treat children different if they belonged to a low social class or to a minority group?
- What was the attendance like in high school?
- What is your favorite memory from your high school years?
- Did you participate in any school activities – sports, clubs, etc.? If so, please tell us more.
- What was the coursework like in high school?
- How would a student be discipline, if he/she stepped out of line?
- Did your high school have school pep rallies and dances? If so, please tell us a little about this.

- Were you encouraged or discouraged from attending college or a normal school?
- Is there anything else about high school that you would like to share with us today?

Health Care & Funerals

- Please tell us about the health care that was available when you were growing up.
- Was anyone in your family seriously ill or injured during your childhood?
- What kind of help did they get?
- Do you recall any home remedies or cures? Such as?
- Do you remember hearing about births at home?
- What do you remember about midwives?
- Where was the closest doctor's office?
- During your childhood, did you ever visit a dentist? Please elaborate on this.
- During your childhood, did you ever visit an eye doctor? Please elaborate on this.
- Did anyone in your family pass away during your childhood? If so, how?
- Did you have a funeral for him/her? Can you describe it?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about health care and funerals?

Historical Events - The Dirty Thirties

- Please describe the Dirty Thirties.
- How did the Depression affect your family?
- Did you experience any dust storms? If so, please tell us more about this.
- Did you experience any problems with grasshoppers, jackrabbits, or other animal pests during these years? If so, please share your memories with us.
- How did your parents keep food on the table during the Dirty Thirties?
- Do you remember the WPA? If so, please tell us about it.
- Do you remember the CCC's? If so, please tell us about them.
- Is there anything you would like to add about the Dirty Thirties?

Historical Events - World War II

- Please tell us how the outbreak of World War II change your life.
- How did rationing affect your family?
- Did speaking German affect your relationship with others in school, town, or church?

- Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?
- Was anyone in your family drafted? Or, did anyone in your family volunteer to serve in the war? If so, please tell us more about it.
- Did you serve in World War II? If so, where did you serve. Please tell us about your experiences.

Historical Events - Korean War

- How did outbreak of the Korean War affect your family?

Historical Events - Vietnam War

- How did the outbreak of the Vietnam War affect your family?

Historical Events - World Trade Center Attack

- How were you affected by the attack on the World Trade Center?

Childhood Memories Conclusions

- What was your most stressful childhood experience?
- What is your happiest childhood memory?
- What was the most adventurous thing you did during your childhood?
- Is there anything else about your childhood memories you would like to add?

Higher Education

- Please tell me about your college experiences.
- What did your parents think about you going to college?
- Who funded your education?
- Where did you go?
- Were you awarded a degree? If so, what degree?
- What is your favorite college memory?
- What is your most difficult memory?
- While you were at school, did you have any part-time jobs?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your college/higher education experiences?

Weddings & Traditions

- How did you meet your spouse?
- Was there any “arrangement” or “arranging” done by either family?
- What was your parents’ attitude toward your spouse?

- When and where did you get married?
- Will you tell me about the wedding and reception?
- Were there money dances for the bride and groom? Tell me how?
- What foods were served at weddings?
- Anything unusual about your courtship and/or wedding?
- Did have a honeymoon? If so, please tell me about it.
- Is there anything else regarding wedding traditions that you would like to add?

Concluding Insights & Reflections

- Why do you think it is important to tell your life story?
- Are there other thoughts or observations you would like to share?
- Is there anyone else you would like to suggest for us to interview?

Things To Remember:

- *Remember to have the INFORMED CONSENT signed before the interview begins.*
- Use these questions only as a guide. They are not meant to be addressed in any particular order.
- Remember, these questions are only a sample. They may not all be addressed in one interview and others may be added.
- When the interviewee mentions specific names that are difficult to spell ask the interviewee to spell out the names.

Questions Prepared and Revised by:

Ann Braaten, Jessica Clark, Dale Davis, Shirley (Welk) Fredricks, Margaret Freeman, Jay Gage, LaVerne Ruff Graff, Brother Placid Gross, Jessica Holkup, Tom Isern, Betty and Chris Maier, Michael M. Miller, Cheryl Schumacher, Danielle Stuckle, Roland Wagner, Catherine (Glatt) Wald, and Michele (Ziebarth) West.

*** This project is indebted to Paul Thompson's work, *The Voice of the Past* for its detailed interview guide. We incorporated several of Thompson's suggested interview questions. For more information, see Paul Thompson's "A Life Story Interview Guide" in *The Voice of the Past*.