

A FREE GUIDE TO FINDING THE STORY INSIDE THE MEMORIES

BEFORE YOU WRITE THEIR STORY

7 things to discover before a family story disappears.

*For anyone who has ever thought,
I need to write this down before it's too late.*

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Why I created this guide.

Long before there was a book, there were memories.

My own journey began with my mother's story, the places she remembered, the people she loved, the losses she carried, and the moments that stayed vivid across a lifetime. Those memories became the beginning of something larger. I listened, asked questions, researched the world around them, looked for the turning points and, eventually, learned how to shape lived experience into a story that could reach people who had never met my family.

That process taught me something important: preserving a life is not simply about collecting dates and facts. It is about noticing the details that reveal who someone was, what changed them, what they endured, what they loved — and why their story matters. This little guide is a place to begin.

*You are not trying to capture an entire life today.
You are simply learning how to recognize the story that may
already be waiting for you.*

The story is rarely where you think it is.

Family histories often begin with facts: names, dates, places, marriages, jobs and moves. Those details matter. But facts alone are not what make a reader lean closer. The story lives in what a person remembers: the scent of a childhood kitchen, the sound that frightened them, the person they waited for, the choice that changed everything, the photograph they cannot throw away.

This guide is not about becoming a professional writer. It is about learning to listen differently, gather what matters, and recognize the beginnings of a story before the memories are lost.

Begin with curiosity. You can learn the craft later.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Choose one person whose story you want to preserve. Read the seven discoveries first. Then use the Story Map and First Interview pages. Do not try to capture an entire lifetime in one sitting. One vivid memory is enough to begin.

01 • DISCOVERY

Find the story, not just the facts.

A life can contain thousands of facts and still hide its most important story. Instead of asking only what happened, look for what changed.

TRY THIS

- *What happened that divided life into a 'before' and an 'after'?*
- *What did this person want most at that time?*
- *What stood in the way?*
- *Who or what changed the direction of their life?*
- *What did they believe would happen — and what actually happened?*
- *How did this experience change the person they became?*
- *What did they have to let go of in order to move forward?*

02 • DISCOVERY

Start with the memory they always tell.

Repeated stories are clues. The story your parent or grandparent has told twenty times may contain an emotional truth they have been carrying for decades.

TRY THIS

- *Which story do they tell without being asked?*
- *Where does their voice change when they tell it?*
- *Which detail is always included?*
- *What might that memory mean to them now?*
- *Who is always present in the story?*
- *Is there a part of the story that seems especially important to them?*
- *Has the story changed in the way they tell it over the years?*
- *What do you think they want you to understand when they tell this story?*

03 • DISCOVERY

Ask for sensory memories.

General questions produce general answers. Sensory questions can reopen a room, a street, a kitchen or a childhood that has been gone for seventy years — awakening details that have been quiet for decades.

TRY THIS

- *What could you smell?*
- *What sounds do you remember?*
- *What were you wearing?*
- *Was it hot or cold?*
- *What could you see from the window?*
- *What did the room, house or street look like?*
- *Is there a particular food, song or smell you associate with that time?*
- *What small detail can you still picture clearly?*

04 • DISCOVERY

Find the turning points

Stories move because something changes. Look for arrivals, departures, losses, discoveries, decisions, danger, love, betrayal, migration, work and homecoming.

TRY THIS

- *When did everything change?*
- *What decision are you still glad you made?*
- *What choice would have changed your life completely?*
- *Who arrived or left at exactly the right or wrong time?*
- *Was there a moment you knew life would never be the same?*
- *Was there a small decision that had much bigger consequences than you realized at the time?*
- *Looking back, which moment changed the course of your life most?*
- *Was there something that happened by chance that changed the direction of your life?*

05 • DISCOVERY

Listen for what wasn't said.

Silence can be part of a family story too. Never pressure someone to disclose painful memories. Instead, notice subjects that are avoided, softened or described differently over time.

TRY THIS

- *Are there years no one talks about?*
- *Are there photographs with unknown people?*
- *Were there subjects children were told not to ask about?*
- *What would you like future generations to understand that was difficult to say at the time?*
- *Were there family secrets you only understood when you were older?*
- *Is there something you understand differently now than you did then?*
- *Was there someone in the family whose story was rarely spoken about?*

06 • DISCOVERY

Gather the objects that they remember.

A story becomes richer when memories can be anchored to something tangible. Photographs, recipes, letters, medals, passports, maps, clothing, music and household objects can all unlock details.

TRY THIS

- *Choose five objects or photographs connected to the person's life.*
- *Ask where each came from and who touched or used it.*
- *Photograph or scan important items.*
- *Write down names and context while someone can still identify them.*
- *Is there something you still own that has a story behind it?*
- *If you could save only one family object or photograph, which would it be — and why?*
- *Is there an object that reminds you immediately of someone you loved?*
- *Who gave it to you, and what do you remember about them?*
- *What memory comes back when you hold or look at it?*

07 • DISCOVERY

Record the voice while you can.

Written notes preserve information. A voice recording preserves something else: cadence, laughter, pauses, pronunciation, emotion and personality. With permission, record conversations whenever possible.

TRY THIS

- Use a phone or simple recorder; perfect equipment is unnecessary.
- Begin with easy memories before difficult ones.
- Let silence happen. People often remember more after a pause.
- Back up recordings and label them with the person's name, date and topic.
- Ask them to tell the story in their own words before filling in the facts.
- If a memory brings emotion, allow the conversation to slow down rather than moving to the next question.
- At the end, ask: *Is there something I didn't ask that you wish I had?*

The Story Map.

Before you think about chapters, map the emotional shape of the story. Short notes are enough. You are looking for connections, not polished prose.

PERSON	<i>Whose story are you preserving?</i>
PLACE	<i>Where does the story belong?</i>
TIME	<i>Which period matters most?</i>
WANT	<i>What did this person long for?</i>
CONFLICT	<i>What made that difficult or impossible?</i>
CHANGE	<i>What event changed the direction of their life?</i>
LOVE	<i>Who or what gave them strength?</i>
LOSS	<i>What did they have to leave, lose or accept?</i>
LEGACY	<i>What should someone 100 years from now understand?</i>

The first interview.

Follow the energy in the conversation. When a small detail appears, ask about it. The unexpected detour is often where the real story begins.

1. *When you picture your childhood home, what is the first thing you see?*
2. *Who made you feel safest when you were young?*
3. *What did an ordinary day look like then?*
4. *What did your family celebrate, cook, sing or believe?*
5. *What is a memory that still makes you laugh?*
6. *What were you most afraid of?*
7. *What was the first major change you remember?*
8. *Who had the greatest influence on the person you became?*
9. *What did you once want that you never told anyone about?*
10. *What was one decision that changed your life?*
11. *What did your generation understand that mine may not?*
12. *What story do you most want our family to remember?*

You do not need to be a writer to begin.

A family story does not begin with a perfect opening sentence. It begins when someone decides that a memory matters enough to save. Record one conversation. Label one photograph. Write down one story you have heard all your life. Small acts of preservation become an archive. An archive can become a story. And one day, that story may become a book.

You just need to keep asking.

WHEN YOU'RE READY FOR THE NEXT STEP

You've begun gathering the memories. The next challenge is discovering what belongs, what connects, and what the story is really about.