Interviewing for Genealogical Clues

by Wevonneda Minis

Genealogical speakers with a projector, slides, and an audience eager for family history research guidance are very happy people. They come alive during conferences, meetings, webinars, and workshops. The feelings engendered as they lecture to other genealogists are more than satisfying. Many experience euphoria akin to that felt after breaking through a brick wall.

After more than twenty years as a family history researcher and fifteen as a presenter, it's not hard for me to decide which topics to lecture on. But one of my presentations certainly is not the draw I was sure it would be. I don't understand why genealogists are not flocking to my "Interviewing for Genealogical Clues" lecture. There is so much more to say on the topic than "interview older family members first."

The interviewing lecture usually draws one-fourth or fewer attendees than my other presentations. It's a great lecture filled with humorous examples and many explanations about why some approaches usually work better than others. I get strong, positive feedback from genealogists who do attend the lecture; many have been researching for three or four years. But I suspect the topic is underappreciated by those who would never choose to hear it.

Would not interviewing skills serve all genealogists well? Isn't it true that we are not all born with such skills? Could it be that the topic just is not sexy enough?

Three decades as a journalist taught me that great interviews don't just happen. The most successful interviews require much more than asking a series of pertinent questions. In genealogy, getting the information most likely to contain evidence to resolve family history mysteries also requires us to prioritize interviewees, select good interview environments, think about interviewees' areas of expertise, spot research clues, develop relationships with interviewees, and much more.

Good strong interviews may prompt us to search for ancestors in records we would never have dreamed of checking. They also may lead us to interview relatives and family friends we never knew existed.

Lectures on interviewing will never attract as many genealogists as those about Internet research, probate records, and other popular topics. But, should genealogical speakers focus developing lectures many family historians are likely to choose? How great is our obligation to develop those we feel certain they need?

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