

Don't Sit in the Dark – Shed Light on Your History

Ready, Set . . . Begin!

Many of these ideas are extracted and condensed from
“Random Sampler” in the *Ensign*

President Boyd K. Packer said all Church members have the following six responsibilities in family history and temple work:

- Our own life history
- A Book of Remembrance
- Our first 4 generations on each line, then as far back as we can
- Participate in extraction
- Hold family meetings and reunions
- Do the temple work for ourselves, our progenitors, and others

Boyd K. Packer, “Your Family History: Getting Started,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2003, 12

“Man was not given a choice to do this work when and if he has time, but the work was given as an obligation to be fulfilled.” President Howard W. Hunter

Writing Our Life History

A Life Celebration Album

In honor of my 50th birthday, my daughter-in-law wrote letters to all my close friends and family members asking them to write a letter of congratulations to me and e-mail them to her. She requested that their letter contain memories, stories or reflections of our times together and include photos if they had some. She printed the letters out on colorful scrapbook papers and compiled them in plastic sleeves in a 3-ring binder. They told a chronological story of my life. She added more photos, taking me from birth to age 50. What a treasure! It is so fun to see my life from the eyes of those who have shared it with me. And it has prompted me to add to my life history. - Jan Hawkes

Audio-visual Life Story

My husband's parents never got around to writing their life histories on paper. Near the end of their lives, I interviewed each of them and recorded their voices on audio cassette tapes. They told condensed versions of their lives, how they met and what they had accomplished. I edited the tapes to make one smooth narration of their lives. I gathered photos of their lives and scanned them into digital format and arranged them

to coincide with the narration. I inserted the photos and sound track into video making software and burned DVDs for each member of the family. We now have their life story told in their own voices with their pictures in an easy to view format. - Jan Hawkes

The Write Habit

- **Getting started.** We taught our children to keep journals early. Our toddlers delighted in tracing their handprints or drawing the events of the day on journal paper.
- **Writing journal entries.** As the children learned to write, we encouraged them to begin writing their own journal entries, from a few phrases to pages about an event.
- **Measuring the cost.** Spiral notebooks, loose-leaf binders or bound journals.
- **Developing a habit.** Our bedtime routine includes scripture reading, family prayer, and writing down the day's events. Developing the habit makes it less of a burden.
- **Giving encouragement.** If something of consequence happens to a member of the family, we comment about what a nice journal entry it will make. We once issued the challenge to write daily for a week. For one journal entry, we were rewarded after FHE with a bowl of ice cream. For two entries, we added chocolate syrup; for three entries, strawberries; and so on. We pointed out that we each received our "just desserts."
- **Teaching the gospel.** Scriptures are like inspired journal entries kept by a prophet. We refer to ancestors' journals to illustrate an important point.
- **Using our entries.** We refer to our journals to measure personal progress and answer questions. Our son produced the needed information from his journal to qualify for a Scout badge. Journal entries frequently come to the rescue. The more extensive and detailed our entries are, the more often we look to our journals for temporal and spiritual guidance. Susan Romney, "The Write Habit," *Ensign*, Sept. 1998, 71

You've Got Mail . . . And a Journal

Every week our children write e-mails to their grandparents about the interesting, happy, and sad events they have experienced. They copy in me and my husband. We save and print any e-mails of interest, then compile them in a three-ring binder for each child. Not only have our children become acquainted with long-distance relatives, but they have also become more motivated to write, thus improving their writing skills. And our younger children participate, too, because we simply type what they want to say! Anastasia Kneeland, "You've Got Mail . . . and a Journal," *Ensign*, June 2002, 73

My Journal, A Vital Record

Is keeping a journal worth it? Of course—especially when you consider that your posterity will seek information about you whether you provide it or not! Writing it yourself helps ensure accuracy and allows you to emphasize what *you* think is most important. It is also helpful your own memory begins to fade.

Be complete. In addition to sharing thoughts and feelings, your journal is a record of your life's events. For future reference, be sure to include complete information: names (first and last), dates (including the year), and places (city, state, or other information applicable to your country). Don't assume that your future readers will know the people

and events you know. It may seem tedious at first to add these details, but your descendants will be grateful for your efforts.

Vary your entries. Don't become obsessed with fact and exclude of emotion. You want a balance of both. In addition to narrative entries, my journal contains lists of people who attended events like my children's baby blessings, postcards, favorite scriptures, synopses of ward and stake meetings, sketches and even some of my favorite recipes. Preston Draper, "My Journal, A Vital Record," *Ensign*, Sept. 2004, 72

My Achievement Journal

For years, setting and keeping New Year's resolutions was difficult for me. But then I discovered that by keeping a journal of my accomplishments, I could build on my successes and set goals for what I wanted to achieve next. With a notebook or journal to write in or a computer to key in your thoughts, you can do the same. Write down the events or accomplishments that bring you peace, courage, and confidence. Keep your record in an accessible place where you can easily record any meaningful events. Look for areas where you feel ready to stretch a bit more and record your goals. For instance, if you walked every day for the past several months, why not set a goal to enter a local 5K run/walk? The important idea is to focus on our achievements, no matter how small. By focusing on our successes, we can set goals and achieve all that our Father in Heaven would have us do in this life. Janine Simons Creager, "My Achievement Journal," *Ensign*, Jan. 2005, 73

Children's Bedtime Journals

I have been keeping a journal for each of my children in inexpensive, spiral-bound notebooks. I write the child's name on the outside and fill the pages with fun things about their lives. I record stories the children have told me and songs they have invented, and even a favorite recipe or two. In the back of each journal I have kept a dictionary of how each child has learned to speak. One child called night crawlers "nightmare worms," trampolines "stampolines," and raspberries "rabbys." At bedtime, when I read stories to my children, I am often asked to take a journal from the shelf and read about their lives. Terri Adams, "Bedtime Journals," *Ensign*, Jan. 1998, 60

A Question A Week

I bought two notebooks and wrote 60 questions on a separate piece of paper, such as "What do you remember about your baptism?" and "What was your first job?" On Father's Day, my husband and I gave the books and questions to our dads and requested they take one question a week and write down the answer in the notebook or, if they preferred, on computer. We did the same thing on Mother's Day for our moms. The first to respond was my father-in-law, who gave us the notebook for Christmas with answers to all of the questions. Our parents discovered that writing their personal history was not very difficult and brought them personal enjoyment. Koral Slight, "Question-a-Week Family History," *Ensign*, June 1998, 73

Ideas for Keeping Personal Histories Current

Many people relate the year's events in a Christmas newsletter that can easily be added to their personal histories. Parents can use birthdays to help children recap the year's events, including notes about physical growth, interests, friends, and accomplishments. Students may find the end of the school year to be a good time to look back and summarize the events of that grade's experiences. Couples may choose a wedding anniversary, family reunion, or other annual event as an occasion to update their personal histories. Perhaps using a newspaper approach about personal events would work: "The Five Biggest News Stories of the Year" complete with headlines. Ann Woodbury Moore, "History As It Happens," *Ensign*, Mar. 1999, 62

Personal History on Tape

For half an hour each week, tape your thoughts about events from a few of the following categories: childhood, teenage years, mission, college, friends, dating and marriage, career, Church callings, raising a family, spiritual experiences, vacations, the golden years, and special talents and accomplishments. From each category, share two or three of your experiences. Remember, detail is not necessary, nor is recalling every event. Your family will be grateful that they have your voice on tape. Include stories from difficult times in your life and explain what you learned from them. Don't worry about how you speak; just say it in your own words. Think of how grateful you would be to have a tape recording of a great-great-grandfather sharing experiences from his life. If you would like your history to be written, you can transcribe the tapes or ask someone to do this for you. At this point, if you wish, you could edit your personal history and include more details or experiences. Prepare a title page and use the categories listed above as your table of contents. Once everything is typed, insert photocopies of pictures of yourself, and make copies for family members. If you'd like to bind your finished work, you can do this at many photocopy stores. As an alternative, you could use three-ring binders and add more stories later. To further personalize your history, sign and date each copy and give as a gift for the holidays or other occasions. Gail Ratliff Glende, "Personal History on Tape," *Ensign*, Oct. 2001, 68

Our Home Evening Family History

While our children were growing up, we had them take turns keeping minutes of our family home evenings. Our minutes showed the goals we set as a family at the beginning of every year, and that we accomplished many of them. The minutes also reveal the changes in a child's handwriting over the years—from drawing simple pictures to printing to writing in cursive; from scribbling along the side of the page in boredom to drawing recognizable scenes and objects as they listened to the lesson. Keeping minutes of our family home evenings captured on paper some of our best memories of our family growing up. Shirley M. Oakes, "Our Home Evening History," *Ensign*, Feb. 1998, 72

Writing Our Family's History

To help our children develop better reading and writing skills, we decided to devote a few minutes to a writing project each week during family home evening. I gave the children snapshots of a past family event and asked them to write whatever they remembered about the event, then read it aloud to the family. Often we would pass the same photos to everyone and get their perspective of the same event. Not only did we get a different point of view, but by saving the stories we have been able to keep a journal for our personal family history. Donna-Jean Wilson, "Writing Our Family Journal," *Ensign*, Apr. 1998, 72

Our Family History Timeline

I have a historical book that shows yearly timelines, linking people with events, literature, arts, science, and more. Since this format was helpful to my understanding of history, I thought, "Why not adapt this for our family?" When I finished gathering the information I wanted to include, I created our timeline on a computer using a table format and saved it on a disk. I included significant world events also. Now I can update the chart easily and print copies for my children. Our family timeline provides a useful record for us now as well as an accurate history for future generations.

Constance L. Brown, "Our Family History Timeline," *Ensign*, Apr. 2004, 72

A Family Newspaper

One of our children suggested we start a family newspaper. We brainstormed a name for it at family home evening. Following a lesson on sharing, our daughter suggested we call it *Sharing*. The newspaper became a regular family project but usually made it to "press" only once a year. Our children's drawings became the newspaper's "photos." Later we used real photos. Over several decades, the issues we accumulated have become a wonderful source of family history. Susan Billings Mitchell, "Creating a Family Flag," *Ensign*, Sept. 2001, 70

Prune Creek and Other Memories

I made up a questionnaire containing a number of different categories for each of our children to fill out. Categories included favorite toys, favorite activities, favorite places we went, favorite things we did, favorite foods, favorite pets. The five children also remembered a variety of illnesses and injuries. We used these memory joggers to recall stories from their childhoods and recorded them. Now we share them at get-togethers and laugh and remind each other of many other do-you-remember-the-time stories. Now, as parents, they have shared these recollections with their own children. Our family memories have given us perspective and appreciation for the great blessing we have enjoyed of being a family. Catherine R. Slaughter, "Prune Creek and Other Memories," *Ensign*, Aug. 2002, 72

No-Fuss Family History

One Sunday each month our family members all write on a specific “then” topic, such as “Memories of times I spent with Dad,” “What I have learned from Mom,” “My most embarrassing moment,” or “What I remember about my baptism.” That same evening we also write about recent family events and personal experiences, especially those that occurred during the month. Each family member has a binder titled “Our Family—Then and No,” sectioned to store past and present information. We help those too young to write, and long-distance family members mail or e-mail their contributions. Everyone receives copies of the finished products to read and place in their binders. This Sunday activity unites our family. We share our trials and triumphs and focus on blessings we have received from the Lord. Kristin W. Belcher, “No-Fuss Family History,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2002, 64

Family Photo-Journal Albums

Your home’s interior and exterior. I have pictures and journal thoughts for every home my husband and I have lived in and memories about the rooms in the home where I grew up. I drew a simple house plan so that years later my posterity will know how the home’s layout was when I lived there.

Special heirlooms. I’ve written a brief history of each item in the photos, telling about the original owner and any other interesting information.

Schools and teachers. We spend untold hours of our lives at school so we have an album of the interiors and exteriors of our schools and teachers, along with memories of our experiences there.

Lessons. I took photos of my daughter and her instructor as they sewed together at sewing lessons and later when my daughter modeled the finished products. I have pictures of my son during his art and band lessons and performances. It not only boosts our children’s self-confidence to see that the events in their lives are important enough to put in a special book, but it also helps us record their personal histories, starting with their early years.

Favorite toys and pets. Since it’s impossible to store every favorite toy over the years, this is a great way to preserve the memories. And long after beloved pets have passed away, we still enjoy seeing them in our album pages.

Best friends and cousins. Members of our family, especially the children, love to look through our albums and remember special times together.

Vehicles. Any special memories about the vehicles we have owned and trips we took in them are written next to the pictures. I have also recorded how much each cost and any special new features they had—a bit of information that becomes more interesting over the years.

Family Activities. A couple who had studied abroad at the BYU Jerusalem Center came and told us about their experience and wore native costumes. Regular family home evening activities are also good to record, with non-posed pictures showing the family singing, giving a lesson, playing games, bowling, playing croquet or whatever we do. Marlene Cameron Thomas, “Picture This,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2003, 72

Book of Remembrance: Turning the Hearts of the Children to their Fathers

Hard-bound Family History Book

Using GenBook software, I arranged our gedcom data into book format with an index and chapter headings. Each chapter starts with a paragraph of the genealogy for the family group featured in that chapter. I then inserted the appropriate text and photos for each ancestor behind that into their chapter. BYU Press printed the book and is keeping a copy on permanent file for anyone who wants copies in the future. I had the book hard bound by Scheaffer's Binding in Salt Lake City. We made 200 copies for family distribution. It is a beautiful heirloom.

- Jan Hawkes

Grandpa's Coloring Book

We compiled a coloring book for our grandfather as a gift for his 90th birthday celebration. We read his personal history and came up with 14 stories and facts about his life that we used in our book. For example, he was baptized by an elderly man who, as a child, was baptized by the Prophet Joseph Smith. We found pictures in the *Friend* and other sources that we could trace or copy. The *Friend* also gave us ideas like making a dot-to-dot picture of the country where Grandfather served his mission and creating a coded message to decipher. We traced over a photo of my grandfather for the cover. We distributed the coloring books to each family. This remembrance of him will help his descendants know him better. Jill Davis Stewart and Kaye Davis Esplin, "Grandfather's Book: Color Him Loved," *Ensign*, Feb. 1998, 71

One-Minute-A-Day Family History

Using a variety of approaches has helped our children become familiar with important people and events of the past. As we alternate teaching methods, our children stay attentive and interested.

- **A minute a day.** I wrote down 31 of the most important ancestor stories, quotes, and events on small pieces of paper and put them in a jar on the kitchen table. Because our family likes a challenge, I left out one important word or name in each of the stories. Every night after the blessing on the food, we take turns reading one of the slips of paper and supplying the missing word. Then we talk about the story.
- **Dramatize stories.** After reading an ancestor's story, family members are given individual parts, and sometimes we even fashion simple costumes. With a bit of prompting and rehearsal, the children portray men and women from the past.
- **Surprise guests.** My husband and I sometimes don a hat, apron, or a quick costume and go outside and knock on our own front door. We introduce ourselves as someone from the past and tell an inspiring story before exiting through the front door again. Elizabeth G. Ricks, "One-Minute-a-Day Church History," *Ensign*, Mar. 1998, 72

Sharing Stories and Histories

For Christmas one year, my husband and I typed, in large print, brief faith-promoting incidents from the lives of our loved ones and placed them in attractively covered three-ring binders. We gave them to our children so they could leave them out for their own children to read. Now many of our grandchildren will call and say: "I had to speak in church today and I told the story of The Crooked Willow or The Pinto Pony." They have come to know their ancestors, including their trials and testimonies, their faith and commitment. As we study the lives of our ancestors, we are influenced by their testimonies and strength. Family stories can become legacies of faith.

Mary Ellen Smoot, "Family History: A Work of Love," *Ensign*, Mar. 1999, 15

Involving Children in Temple Baptisms

I send family file cards to my grandchildren to do baptisms for our ancestors. I also include whatever bits of information I have found about each individual. For example, William Samuel Baker had a jewelry store in Findley Lake, New York, and loved to go trout fishing. John W. Barden was the sextant of a cemetery and often put notices in the Sherman, New York, newspaper scolding the "errant lads who race their steeds through the cemetery at midnight." Such information makes these ancestors come alive for my grandchildren. It can also form a basis for good family home evening lessons.

Shirley Bock Testi, "Involving Children in Family History," *Ensign*, Jan. 2001, 75

Our New Easter Tradition

On the Saturday before Easter Sunday, we take our children to visit and decorate the graves of our loved ones. Visiting these graves gives us a wonderful opportunity to discuss the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the true meaning of Easter. We teach them that because Jesus Christ was resurrected, their great-grandparents, Grandma Judy, and all who have died will one day be resurrected. We have even gathered around a loved one's grave and sung the hymn "He Is Risen!"

Pamela Richardson, "Our New Easter Tradition," *Ensign*, Apr. 2001, 71

Happy Birthday, Dear Ancestor

Once a month on Sunday, I bake a cake and honor our direct-line ancestors whose birthdays fall during that month. I place each ancestor's name and birthday on a yearly calendar so I know at a glance who we will honor that month. Usually, after our family has enjoyed cake and ice cream, I read the biographies of our ancestors or share an interesting fact or story about them. If I have any of their heirlooms, I show those and explain their significance as well. This activity helps to acquaint our children with their heritage and does not require a great deal of preparation. Marlene Cameron Thomas, "Happy Birthday, Dear Ancestor," *Ensign*, July 2001, 70

Forefather's Day

When my grandchildren arrived for dinner on Father's Day, I had created a display of the pictures of my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, who were now deceased. They were good men who had been wonderful examples of faith and character. Even at their young ages, the children were interested in their ancestors. I told them who each one was, where he had been born, and whatever I knew about him. The afternoon brought a wonderful feeling as we honored our fathers and grandfathers on their special day. Ann Blackshear Alldredge, "Forefather's Day," *Ensign*, June 2003, 73

Our Family Heritage Month

In March, a month before Easter, we tell a story about an ancestor each night. After the story, one of the children puts a small memento in honor of that person on our "family tree." On the first family night in March, we have a Scandinavian dinner in honor of our Swedish ancestors. We fill ourselves with rice cream, sweet cabbage, and Swedish meatballs. We learn how Great-Grandpa Nelson sailed from Sweden in a small wooden ship that was caught in a great storm. We tell the story of Grandpa Solomon, an orphan, who supported himself from the age of 10 by herding sheep. We make sheep with poster board and cotton. We imagine hearing coyotes howling at night to a 10 year old and put homemade coyotes in the branches. We follow the trail of the Mormon Battalion and tell of Great-Grandpa Harris walking from Iowa to California at the age of 17 with a case of the mumps. A picture of an old pair of shoes goes on the tree for him. On Easter we include the heritage we have received from the Savior. We tell the story of the Resurrection and end the day with a Jewish-style dinner. Joan Meade, "Our Family Heritage Month," *Ensign*, Mar. 2003, 69

Family Photo Gallery

At the top of the stairs in our house is a long hall, perfect for hanging family photos. In the center of our portrait gallery I hung a cross-stitched picture of the temple where my husband and I were sealed to remind us that families can be forever. Around it I hung photos in family groupings, including photographs of extended family members at different ages. The children have been able to sort out their relationships to other family members and recognize relatives they rarely see. Collette Burgoyne, "Family Photo Gallery," *Ensign*, June 1999, 73

Family Meetings and Reunions

Family Reunion Talent Show

My husband told one of his favorite "When I grew up on the farm . . ." stories and my daughter wrote it down in first person. She then memorized it and added gestures, a costume and props. She presented this as her talent at the family reunion talent show and it was a hit. Everyone wanted a copy of the story so she put it in storybook form with text and photos so it can be enjoyed for years to come. She plans to use her story

performance at the Storyteller's Competition. Dad has plenty more farm stories so her next project is a collection Dad's farm stories in a storybook for children. - Jan Hawkes

Family Jeopardy

I wrote things down in the form of questions that had happened to each family member in years past at family weddings, vacations, and family reunions and funny or extraordinary things that someone said or did. Then I divided them into the following categories:

- **Kids Will Be Kids.** Who stuck candy up her nose and had to go to the ER?
- **Ouch!** Who got his fingers stuck together with Krazy glue at Scouts?
- **The Way We Were.** Who had a lava lamp in her bedroom?
- **Weddings.** How did Grandpa propose to Grandma?
- **Family History.** Who was the first member of the Church in the Harding family?
- **Vacations.** What was the lake in Alaska where we always caught a lot of fish?

On a large piece of poster board, I drew 30 squares in six rows, and then I cut around three sides of each square, making 30 little doors that could open and shut. On each door I wrote how much the question was worth (100 to 500 points). I attached a large sheet of paper onto the back of the poster board so questions could be written behind each little door. This allowed us to create new categories and new questions later on. We also provided bells or buzzers for each team. Other members came up with more questions and categories and we played it night after night.

Reneé Roy Harding, "Guess Who," *Ensign*, Aug. 1998, 70

Family Bingo

To start, we took pencils and slips of paper and wrote down the good things happening in our lives: new interests, job promotions, and other accomplishments. We then gathered the slips of paper and put them in a bowl. Rick was appointed to draw the slips and read them. We gave each person a Family Bingo card: a sheet of paper with a grid of 16 spaces. One of the spaces was marked "free." In the remaining spaces each player wrote the names of any 15 relatives. Rick drew slips of paper from the bowl and read what was written on them. After guessing who it was, those who had the name crossed it off their cards. When we learned that two-year-old Jonathan knew the ABC song, we sang it with him. We hushed the room so Mike could tell how he taught his nonmember uncles to pray. We gasped to hear that Joe, an electrical engineer, had saved over 350,000 computer chips from the scrap heap. We laughed and cheered as the slips were read, and within 20 minutes we felt closer as a family.

Gayla Wise, "Family Bingo," *Ensign*, June 1999, 73

Self-guided Cemetery Tour (Or tour Nauvoo, Salt Lake City, or your home town.)

To help our extended family members get to know their ancestors, we created a self-guided tour on audio cassette through several nearby cemeteries. The tape recordings included directions to the cemetery and to the individual graves of our ancestors, together with recorded stories and information about each person. We obtained the

help of several men and women in the ward to read the histories into a tape recorder as though they were the actual ancestor speaking to their descendants today. I filled out a form for each ancestor that included birth and death dates and places; parents, spouse, children and a photograph if one was available. We prepared a loose-leaf binder with a nice cover for each family that contained a pedigree chart and the forms about each ancestor. A zippered pouch in the binder held the cassette tape. As I walked to each site, listened to the tape and looked at the photos, I felt as if my ancestors were standing there beside me and tears came to my eyes. It was an emotional and spiritual experience and it helped me feel closer than ever before to many of my ancestors. Florence C. Youngberg, "A Tour Back in Time," *Ensign*, July 1998, 72

An Ancestor Party

Young adults held a family history party. Everyone came dressed as one of their ancestors. During the evening all of them had a turn to tell about the ancestor they represented. Games included churning butter, splitting wood, braiding rugs, and using a plow and harness. Scones and cider topped off the evening. Lois G. Kullberg, "Fun with Family History," *Ensign*, Oct. 2000, 71

Five Family History Activities

When we experience a small part of our ancestors' lives, they become real to us—not just names and dates on a chart. Family history work then becomes personal as we help fulfill the prophecy to turn "the heart[s] of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6).

Play "What is this thing?" Display antique items or find pictures of items that your ancestors likely used. Have your children guess what each item is and how it was used.

Map your ancestors' travels. Using a map of the country where your ancestors lived, locate their places of residence. If they moved often, discuss their modes of travel. Children will enjoy marking locations with stickers or colored markers and drawing pictures depicting their ancestors' travels.

Plan an "old-games" night. Choose activities children did long ago. Make paper dolls or slingshots and practice shooting inanimate targets outside in a safe place. For additional ideas, invite grandparents to share their favorite childhood activities.

Make old-fashioned musical instruments. Due to limited resources, immigrants often devised their own musical instruments. With a little creativity, you can do the same. Strum an old washboard, clank a set of pots and pans, or clack an old pair of spoons on an open hand. Many household items make great "instruments."

Visit a family history center. Discuss which ancestors you would like to know more about. Choose one or two ancestors who you know are listed on the IGI or Ancestral File. Then watch as your children excitedly find them during their computer search. You can also create a similar activity at home by accessing the Church's family history Web site at www.familysearch.org. Sharleen Wiser Peck, "Family Home Evening Helps: Five Family History Activities," *Ensign*, Feb. 2004, 72