**Example Questions**

*The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide developed a list of questions concerning several areas that are very helpful and a good place to start. Remember, nothing beats preparation and knowing your subject/topic intimately enough to develop your own questions, especially as they are tailored to your own specific interests, goals, agenda, or even, if applicable, an institution’s mission.*

**Biographical Questions**

Q: What is your name? Where and when were you born?

Where did you grow up? Where have you lived? What jobs

have you had? What do you do for a living now?

**Family Folklore**

Q: What do you know about your family name? Are there

stories about its history or origins? Has it undergone any

changes? Are there any stories about those changes? Are

there any traditional first names or nicknames in your

family? What are they? How did they come about? Are there

any naming traditions? What are they?

Q: Do you know any stories about how your family first

came to the United States? Where did they first settle? Why?

How did they make a living? Did your family stay in one

place or move around? How did they come to live in this

area?

Q: If your tradition-bearer is a first-generation immigrant,

you might ask him or her: Why did you leave to come to the

United States? What was the journey like? Which family

members came along or stayed behind? What were some of

your first impressions and early experiences in this country?

What traditions or customs have you made an effort to

preserve? Why? Are there traditions that you have given up

or changed? Why?

Q: What languages do you speak? Do you speak a different

language in different settings, such as home, school, or work?

Are there any expressions, jokes, stories, celebrations where a

certain language is always used? Can you give some examples?

Q: What stories have come down to you about your parents

and grandparents? More distant ancestors? (If you are inter-

viewing your grandparents, ask them to tell you stories about

what your parents were like when they were young!)

Q: Do you know any courtship stories? How did your

parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet

and marry?

Q: What are some of your childhood memories? What games

did you play when you were a child? Did you sing verses when

you played games? What were they? What kinds of toys did

you play with? Who made them? Did you make any yourself?

How did you make them? What kinds of materials did you

use? What kind of home entertainment was there? Was there

storytelling? Music? Were there craft traditions? Describe

these traditions.

Q: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

What are they? How did they come about?

Q: How are holidays traditionally celebrated in your family?

What holidays are the most important? Are there special fam-

ily traditions, customs, songs, foods? Has your family created

its own traditions and celebrations? What are they? How did

they come about?

Q: What special foodways traditions does your family have?

Have any recipes been preserved and passed down in your

family from generation to generation? What are they? What

are their origins? Have they changed over the years? How?

Have any of the ingredients been adapted or changed? Why?

Are there certain foods that are traditionally prepared for

holidays and celebrations? Who makes them? Are there

family stories connected to the preparation of special foods?

Q: Does your family hold reunions? When? Where? Who

attends? How long have the reunions been going on? What

activities take place? Are awards given out? Is there a central

figure who is honored? Why? What sorts of stories are told

at these events?

Q: What family heirlooms or keepsakes and mementos do

you possess? Why are they valuable to you? What is their

history? How were they handed down? Are there any

memories or stories connected with them?

Q: Do you have any photo albums, scrapbooks, home

movies? Who made them? When? Can you describe/explain

their contents? Who is pictured? What activities and events

are documented?

**Local History and Community Life**

Q: Describe the place — urban neighborhood, small town,

rural community, suburb — where you grew up. What was it

like? How has it changed over the years? What brought about

these changes? What did people do for a living? What do

they do now?

Q: Can you draw a map of your local community? Of your

neighborhood? Your family home? Your farmstead? What

places stand out most in your mind and why? What are/were

your neighbors like? What kinds of local gatherings and

events are there? What stories and memories come to mind?

Q: What community traditions are celebrated today?

Church suppers? Chinese New Year parades? Saint’s day

processions? Cinco de Mayo celebrations? What are they

like? How long have they been going on? How have they

changed? Who is involved? Why are they important to the

community?

Q: How have historical events affected your family and com-

munity? For example, what were some of your experiences

during World War II, the Civil Rights Movement?

Q: What tools are involved? How and when are they used?

Q: How do you judge excellence within the tradition?

What standards and criteria are used to evaluate the way the

tradition is performed? What makes someone respected in

the tradition?

Q: In what context is the skill/tradition performed? For

whom? When?

Q: What do you value most about what you do? Why?

Q: What do you think is the future of this tradition? What

are its challenges and opportunities? Are others learning

and practicing the tradition?

Cultural Traditions/Occupational Skills

Q: How did you first get started with this particular

tradition/skill? What got you interested?

Q: How did you learn your skills? Who taught you? When?

What was the learning process like? What is the most chal-

lenging or difficult aspect of the tradition to learn? Why?

Q: What are the key characteristics of the tradition? What is

its history? Do you know how and where the tradition origi-

nated? How has it traditionally been practiced? How has it

changed or developed over time?

Q: Does the tradition have different styles or variations?

What are they?

Q: Describe the steps of the process from start to finish.

What’s involved?

Q: What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed?

What techniques and methods?

Q: What raw materials are used? Where do you get your

materials/supplies/ingredients? How are they prepared?

Have they changed over time? How? Why?

*In concluding interviews or near the end, over the years, I have found the following very beneficial and often I have experienced that they can lead to even more questions and interview time and bear a lot of fruit (sometimes not):*

Q: What is your favorite memory or story about X? Is there something I have failed to ask you that you have wanted to share but I have not given you the chance to do so? Is there something you think I should have asked you, but did not?