

## **Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage Interviewing Guide**

### **Biographical Questions**

- 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 possessions did you bring with you and why? 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 interviewing 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 family 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 community? For example, what were some of your experiences during World War II, the Civil Rights Movement? 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 challenging 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 originated? 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?

**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?