

Consider what your goals are. What do you want people to know? What do you want to leave them with? What interests you about your family history? Are you going to tell the good stuff and the bad?

Use the techniques of fiction. Some suggestions:

1. Tell family stories; explain family sayings. Don't rush through them.
2. Develop characters (scan pictures in, and describe them: how does Rosey look? What would you imagine from looking at this picture? What physical features seem to run in the family?)
3. Describe your materials, if they're interesting (bible, cemetery), or one satisfying search.
4. GO there, and describe the place.
5. Interview the old folks. Tell about them. Tell your memories.
6. Remember the difference between factual truth and the truth of family stories: what does the family SAY? What does it mean that we tell these stories?

General advice for writing:

1. NEVER worry about how to begin. Begin with what sticks in your mind. A good opening will happen.
2. Stop when you feel as if you're finished; don't make yourself compose an ending to the story.
3. Write right now. (Carry a notebook.)
4. Read it out loud.
5. Simplify: use short words rather than long ones. How would you TELL this?
6. Read William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and *Inventing the Truth: The Art & Craft of Memoir*.
7. Read Bailey White's *Mama Makes Up Her Mind* for examples of how to tell true stories.
8. Read Meg Bowles' *How to Tell a Story: The Essential Guide to Memorable Storytelling from The Moth*.

General advice for interviewing:

1. Don't ask yes-or-no questions. Instead, ask:
Tell about a time when [you almost gave up; you felt most triumphant; you were really scared; etc.]
What's a moment that sticks in your mind?
What's your earliest memory?
2. When your subject tells about a moment, ask about sensory impressions: what did it smell/feel/sound/look/taste like?
3. Describe your subject in action:
Caroline suddenly leaned forward over the table, coffee cup clutched in both hands. "What I hate to see," she said, "is the red dust on top of old snow in the bar ditch. It reminds me of that bad time."
4. Don't use quotations to transmit information; do that in your own voice. Use quotations for expression and color: *When the wind came, Mama hung wet sheets over the windows in the clapboard house, to keep the fine sand from silting in. "I'll never forget the smell of hot wet sheet and dirt, dirt, dirt," Caroline said.*
5. Don't report your questions ("When I asked her . . . , she said,") Instead, use paraphrase, direct and indirect quotations, little quotations within your own sentences, etc. TELL your subject's story.
6. Begin in the middle of things, then identify your subject: *On the bookshelf is a small black-and-white photo of a Model T scooting down a dirt road toward the viewer; behind it is a black wall of dirt that reaches almost to the upper limit of the picture. "Papa took that when the big dirt blew in," said Caroline. "I was only seven, but I knew Mama was scared. 'Get in here, Dale,' she shouted. 'Get back in here.'"*

Some examples (using my own family stories):

1. Find the character: Rosey and Albert. In the Jenkins family photograph, Rosey sits, straight-backed and solemn, on the right-hand edge of the picture, in a high-necked white blouse, her hair pulled up and back from her forehead. She looks very serious.

Rosey Bell Jenkins had some sad experiences in her life, but she didn't believe in complaining. In fact, she banned arguing within the family. She spoke her mind ("Albert, don't take an aspirin every time you pass that aspirin box"), but she didn't allow useless bickering among her eight children, no matter how old they were.

As far as we know, Rosey's first tragic event happened when she was sixteen. She was engaged to marry, the ring was bought, and a few days before the wedding her fiancé died in a buggy accident. Knowing her stoicism, I imagine she didn't moan and cry around the best parlor. (She reared Mama, and Mama never saw her cry.)

Her father James Henry knew she was grieving, however, and he was looking out for some young man who might supply the place of the lost fiancé. James Henry was a builder in Brushy Mound (he had built every church in town, as well as the old rocker sitting in my living room, beautifully made of scrap lumber). One day a young "jack" (free-lance) carpenter named Albert Whitlock drifted into town from Arkansas. He was a wiry strawberry blond, full of jokes and trouble, poor, but clever at fixing things. James Henry invited him to dinner.

I wish I knew what made the austere and serious Rosey Bell take notice of young Albert; after more than 50 years of marriage, they still seemed an odd match. But he loved her, and years after her death of cancer at 76, he still heard the rustle of her skirts in the kitchen.

2. Find the artifact: The Jenkins/Whitlock family bible. The Jenkins/Whitlock family bible is a thick tome (4 inches x 8 ½ inches x 11 inches) with a broken brown cardboard (pseudo-leather) cover, elaborately etched with the title *The HOLY BIBLE and the Bible Arranged in Subjects with a Complete Concordance and Comprehensive Helps*. The book weighs at least 20 pounds: nobody ever toted it to Sunday school.

The pages for recording family data are in the middle of the book. My great-grandmother Rosey's father James Henry Jenkins recorded births in it, beginning with his wife Sally Ann's daughter by a previous marriage (1864). Then his 10 children's births are carefully entered, in ink faded to brown and in his Virginia country dialect: "Rosey Bell Jenkins Were Born June 9, 1879." Every word begins with a capital letter; maybe he thought this information was too important for lower case. Aunt Edith Whitlock, Rosey and Albert's oldest daughter, has added some notes in her small, neat, school-teacher's hand: "James Henry Jenkins took appendicitis June 10, 1931. . . developed pneumonia June 16 . . ."

Clearly the bible was the focus of some drama in its early days. Rosey's youngest sister Annie Louise (called "Luke") scratched her own name out of the bible at some point. The scratching looks furious, and the greatest fury seems reserved for the date of her birth, where the paper is almost torn through. Later, someone has re-written the date in heavy black ink just above – 1898 – and the whole entry is added at the bottom: Annie L. Jenkins Were Born"

3. Find the place: Brushy Mound. All that's left of the farming community of Brushy Mound is a lone brick chimney in the middle of a field. When I last saw it, the heavy East Texas July heat seemed to press down all sounds except the rhythmic song of the cicadas. The grass brushed against my knees as I walked out to the chimney: whose was it? None of the old folks I knew remembered for sure, but the question was always a rich source of argument.

If you wander in that field, you'll trip over more evidence of the past: a horse shoe, a door knob, a barrel hoop, even (at the far end) someone's front door steps, now leading dizzily toward the Texas sky. This is the place where James Henry and Sally Ann Jenkins moved their remaining 8 children in 1891, in order to get away from the Virginia custom of marrying cousins (one son – Henry – returned to Virginia to marry his cousin Fanny.)