

Sample Interview Questions for a Relative

1. What was life like when you were a child?
2. How were holidays celebrated?
3. What many big events in history do you remember?
4. What important inventions have been invented since you were a child?
5. Did any of the wars affect you at all? And in what way?
6. Beyond school, what did you participate in as a child?
7. What elective classes did your schools offer you from middle school on up?
8. What did soda, candy and fast food cost when you were young?
9. When you were a teenager, what kind of clothes were worn?
10. What do you remember about me as a baby?

1. *What was life like when you were a child?*

We had to wear different undershirts (not T-shirts) and we had to wear flannel leggings which were itchy when we went out to play in the snow. We wore caps with snaps around the chin. We had no TV and a big radio (console) in the living room that I used to listen to on Saturday mornings. Cowboys and cowboy guns were very popular with almost all kids (including girls). Kids used to love to dress up in cowboy clothes and to wear toy guns with holsters (and toy bullets, preferably silver).

The cars had a funny car smell to them. They had running boards and were curved on top and were not at all compact (today, they would be called "gas guzzlers"). You could take streetcars practically everywhere; they were made of wood, not steel. A streetcar or subway ride cost a nickel.

It was easy to get carsick and there were no superhighways, so it took about twice as long to get everywhere -- like, about two hours by car to my grandmother's in Danvers, a trip that would be about an hour today.

A lot of dress up clothes were woolen, such as kid's suits. We wore suits to church on Sunday. Girls wore dresses a lot (to school), but it was okay for them to wear pants for play

They still had steam trains; I remember taking one to an area north of Boston from North Station in Boston. It was really huffing and puffing (I recall that before we boarded).

Once my father took us all out to dinner on Mother's Day. It was rare to go out to eat. We went to an Italian restaurant in the North End. I bet the whole meal for the family was less than \$10, well not more than \$20 (at least). Julius Larosa (an Italian singer) was very popular. So was "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" "Side by Side," and a lot of other corny songs. Rock-and-roll really hadn't been invented yet. Johnny Mathis was also very popular, and Pat Boone soon would be (in around 1956).

Gene Autry was real popular. So was the Lone Ranger. And people were afraid of the Reds (as Russian communists were then called). There was a popular TV show called "I Led Three Lives" about a man

who was continually fighting against Russian spies, but he worked undercover, and no one but his wife knew what he was really doing. People still got the electric chair a lot (death penalty); it wasn't in the news all that much, but it was scary to contemplate, and I recall that crime and jail seemed pretty awesome and scary (but not attractive to me personally). I remember reading about the Brinks Robbery which was a big deal when it happened in Boston (in around 1954). I remember the big black headlines the day the Red Sox first baseman, a young college graduate and former football star (from Boston College, I believe) died of a heart condition -- I believe the headline said, "Harry Agannis is Dead!" It seemed so sad that it was impressive.

TV started getting popular when I was 7 or 8 or so, but we didn't get a TV until slightly later. "Howdy Doody" was an incredibly popular TV show that every kid loved. I thought Phineas T. Bluster, a cranky old guy (puppet) with side whiskers was a riot. Everyone loved the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Later Disney's show, The Mouseketeers, was a big hit. Everyone wanted to join the Mickey Mouse Club and everyone was in love with Annette Funicello. Davy Crockett was enormously popular, and every kid (every boy, at least) had to have a coonskin cap. Later (like everyone else) I was enthralled by the quiz shows and couldn't believe anyone could actually win the incredible, unfathomable sum of 64,000 dollars (someone finally actually did, to my astonishment). I remember watching American Bandstand (and a precursor show on local Boston TV) in the mid- to late-50's and thinking, these kids are incredibly cool, as I thought were DJ's (disk jockey). "Cool" was a very popular word then, and no one wanted to be thought "square."

A lot of people still washed their hair with soap. I thought we were getting sort of fancy and felt a little sissyish using Breck shampoo, which was popular then. A haircut cost about fifty cents. I remember when it went up to seventy-five and then eighty-five cents and everyone was scandalized. We boys took a bath about once or twice a week (never a shower; we didn't have one).

Hardly anyone was divorced, and practically no mothers worked. Most people seemed to have a minimum of three kids, and a family of four kids like ours seemed like the norm. Most people's moms (mine included) seemed to prepare a lot of convenience foods (frozen vegetables, canned corn, Campbell's soups, canned pork and beans, canned brown bread, fish sticks, hot dogs, canned spaghetti sauce,

frozen strawberries, etc.).

In school, you still had to learn to write using the Palmer method and using scratchy pens with pointy tips and inkwells. The desks and seats in elementary school were wooden and we had a coat rack with wooden pegs to hang our coats on. We moved to a fancier new school in high school where the desk tops were shiny (sort of a laminated wood) and very new and spanky looking. Wooden sleds were pretty popular when I was a kid. The baseball suits were wool or flannel and scratchy.

It was a lots of fun to play cowboys and Indians and sometimes tie other kids up to a tree, or hide and seek.

When my grandfather came to visit, he would sometimes give me a dollar and that really seemed like a fortune!

2. How were holidays celebrated?

Holidays were celebrated pretty much the same as they are today. Thanksgiving was always a special holiday in New England and we would have a large family gathering and plenty of food. Another big and fun day was Patriot's Day (April 19); I remember once being impressed by seeing two men on real horses re-enact Paul Revere's ride.

Once when I was around five or six I went to a real Mayday celebration with a maypole and all. It was a beautiful spring day and I never forgot it. I remember being thrilled because there were pony rides and you could really get on and ride a real horse (albeit a little one).

Christmas was special. I was very excited to get presents. I loved to go to Jordan Marsh's department store and look at the display in the toy department. They always had a great display of electric trains, which were very big then. We had a set of Lionel trains. It was also very exciting to go see Santa Clause at Jordan Marsh's (when I was young enough to do so). I will also remember the Christmas carols which thrilled me to the core. And I once remember getting a hobby horse and wishing it could be real (and wishing that wishing

could make it so) and trying to feed it shredded wheat cereal (hoping it would eat it like a real horse).

3. What big events in history do you remember?

I remember when I heard bells (church bells) tolling one summer evening around 1953 (I was seven) and asked my mother what they were for and my mother said, oh, the Korean War must be over -- that's good.

I remember my mother being very excited to watch the hearings involving Senator McCarthy in 1954.

I remember when then Senator Kennedy made a speech at the 1956 Democratic convention (he tried unsuccessfully to get the vice presidential nomination) and I asked my mother who he was. I couldn't get over how messy his hair looked!

I remember Khrushchev (no one trusted him) and before that the Eisenhower-Stevenson election of 1956. Most of my friends were for Stevenson and I was proud to be on the side of Ike, the winner (because my parents were then Republicans). I remember the "I Like Ike" buttons. I also liked Nixon then. He seemed to be a solid American like my parents.

4. What important inventions have been invented since you were a child?

The personal computer, the color TV, the fax machine, the electronic typewriter, the cordless phone, touch-tone phones -- there are millions of things; I probably overlooked most of them.

5. *Did any of the wars affect you at all? And in what way?*

Yes, the Vietnam War affected me big time. It still is a somewhat painful memory for me. I was very opposed to it and became a conscientious objector, so I was directly affected. All my friends were opposed to it; most found a way to beat the draft.

6. *Beyond school, what did you participate in as a child?*

I loved to play outside with my brother Pete and friends (mostly the latter; Pete was often too busy with his own friends for me).

I was in Little League for a while.

I was in the Cub Scouts for a while.

I went to the Congregational Church and was enrolled in Sunday school.

I took dancing lessons once (I was already about nine or ten years old, at least).

I took piano lessons for a short while (also drums, and even guitar for a very little while, I practically forgot).

From the age of about nine on, I loved baseball, both playing and as a fan of the Red Sox (big time).

I always liked to read.

7. *What elective courses did your schools offer you from middle school on up?*

Hardly anything (elective, that is), other than French was available

from the seventh grade on. It was not well taught, however, until my freshman year in high school.

In high school, there were some elective courses. I particularly liked languages, French and Latin.

I also took typing as an elective course and that was a BIG help to me professionally later on.

8. What did soda, candy, and fast food cost when you were young?

Soda was a nickel for a bottle. There were no cans. Drugstore soda fountains were very popular then. A coke cost a nickel there too. A lime rickey (which I loved) was fifteen cents. I think a banana split was seventy-five cents. An ice cream cone would have been twenty-five cents tops (for a giant cone), but ordinarily it was about a dime.

A comic book (you didn't ask that) was about a dime, later went up to twelve cents.

You could get syrup in your soda at a drugstore and thereby have something like a cherry Coke, vanilla Coke, etc. I liked trying them.

You could return your bottles for a two cents deposit. I don't know if this price was added on to the nickel price (I think not), but I do recall getting what is now called Classic Coke in a bottle out of a machine for five cents. They had a wooden rack next to the machine for you to put the empty bottles back in.

Candy bars were a nickel (as was a pack of bubble gum with cards), and I believe they were much bigger than now. You could get big pieces of candy (mint juleps, root beer barrels) for a penny.

The movies cost fifteen cents.

There really wasn't any such thing as fast food. The closest thing was Howard Johnson's, where you could get ice cream cones (28

flavors!) and basic food like french fries, fried clams, and hamburgers. A hamburger probably cost about fifty cents.

There was a place in downtown Boston called Joe and Nemo's that had cheap hot dogs and hamburgers. I recall that the hot dogs were ten cents and the hamburgers were about the same (maybe fifteen cents). And the White Tower chain was around even then, I think. Hamburgers cost about fifteen cents there, I think.

McDonald's came to Massachusetts in the Sixties, I believe. If I remember correctly, when I first went there (in the late '60s), a hamburger cost nineteen cents (considered cheap even then)!

9. When you were a teenager, what kinds of clothes were worn?

Black high-topped sneakers (basketball shoes); the low sneakers would usually be worn only around or for boating places/purposes.

Dungarees.

Madras shirts.

Bermuda shorts with a sort of madras design.

V-neck sweaters; orlon (a synthetic fabric) was getting popular then and was quite light and comfortable.

Loafers.

Chino pants (sort of baggy).

Cotton shirts; lots of things made out of cotton.

Windbreakers and leather jackets.

10. *What do you remember about me as a baby?*

I can scarcely remember anything since you were born and raised (at that time) in California and I didn't get to see you until you were about eight years old. I only saw your baby picture and thought you were very cute, and heard stories about you from your dad and aunt, about how lively, funny, and cute you were, and how you had quite an amusing and individual personality.

A Report for Cary Emerson Smith (b. 10/16/84), written by Roger Whittredge Smith (b. 11/7/46)

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