

SIXTY QUESTIONS TO ASK AT THE TABLE

Before There Is Nobody Left to Ask

*One question for each of the sixty moments in the book,
written to be asked of the oldest person in the room.*

Print it. Take it to a table where the family is already sitting.
Ask one. Not all sixty.

How to use this

These are not history questions. Nobody needs to know a date to answer one. Each question is tied to a moment in the book, but what it actually asks about is *this family* — and the person you are asking is the only one who can answer it.

Three things that make it work. **Ask one, not twenty:** the first answer is usually short and the second one is the real one, so leave the silence alone and wait. **Ask in the room where the family already is**, after a meal, not in a chair arranged for the purpose. And **write the answer down**, or turn on the voice recorder in your phone and say so plainly — people mind far less than you expect, and an answer nobody wrote down is an answer you will lose.

If somebody says “*oh, that’s not interesting*”, that is almost always the door. What an older person considers ordinary is exactly the part that has disappeared from everyone else’s world.

The Fragile Beginning

01 Is there a photograph in this family that everyone remembers differently? Who is right?

1770 · *The Boston Massacre*

02 What is the boldest thing you ever saw ordinary people in your town do together?

1773 · *The Boston Tea Party*

03 How did the biggest news of your life reach you — who told you, and where were you standing?

1775 · *Lexington & Concord*

04 Which piece of paper in this house matters most, and who decided to keep it?

1776 · *The Declaration of Independence*

05 When did this family take the risky option instead of the safe one, and how did it turn out?

1776 · *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

06 Which winter does this family still talk about, and why that one?

1777–78 · *Valley Forge*

07 What took far longer to finish than anybody expected?

1781 · *Surrender at Yorktown*

08 Who in this family disagreed with everyone else and stayed at the table anyway?

1787 · “*We the People*” — *The Constitution*

09 Who started something new when everyone thought they were too old for it?

1789 · *Washington’s First Inauguration*

A Young Nation Finds Its Feet

10 What do we assume we are entitled to in this family that nobody ever actually agreed to?

1791 · *The Bill of Rights*

11 Who went the furthest from where they were born, and what did they go for?

1803–06 · *The Purchase and the Walk*

12 When did you last feel proud of this country, and what were you looking at?

1814 · *The Star-Spangled Banner at Fort McHenry*

13 What did somebody in this family build, dig or fix with their own hands?

1825 · *The Erie Canal*

14 What did this family lose and never get back — a place, a language, a name?

1838 · *The Trail of Tears*

15 Who taught themselves something they were never supposed to learn?

1845 · *Frederick Douglass Speaks*

16 What did the women in this family do that the men did not notice at the time?

1848 · *Seneca Falls*

17 Who left home for something that might not have been there, and was it?

1849 · *The California Gold Rush*

18 Who helped this family for no reason at all, and were they ever thanked?

1849–60 · *The Underground Railroad*

19 What book, song or film changed somebody's mind in this house?

1852 · *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

The Union Broken and Remade

20 Which argument in this family finally broke into the open, and what set it off?

1861 · *Fort Sumter*

21 What is the hardest photograph this family owns, and who is in it?

1862 · *Antietam — the camera goes to war*

22 What did somebody promise here, and how long did it take to keep?

1863 · *The Emancipation Proclamation*

23 What is the shortest thing anyone ever said to you that you have never forgotten?

1863 · *Gettysburg & the Address*

24 Who is missing from the family photographs, and what happened to them?

1865 · *Appomattox and the Empty Chair*

25 How did this family first travel a long way — by what, and how long did it take?

1869 · *The Golden Spike*

26 Who was the first person in this family to vote, and do we know what for?

1870 · *The 15th Amendment*

Forged in Iron and Light

27 Who was the first in this house to have a telephone, and who did they call?

1876 · *The Telephone*

28 What did this house use for light before the switch, and who still remembers it?

1879–80 · *Edison's Electric Light*

29 Who came here from somewhere else — what did they carry, and what did they leave?

1886–92 · *The Lady and the Door*

30 Whose land was this land before it was ours?

1890 · *The Frontier Closes — Wounded Knee*

31 Who in this family flew first, and were they frightened?

1903 · *Kitty Hawk*

32 What disaster did this family live through, and what did they save first?

1906 · *The San Francisco Earthquake*

33 What did the people in this family do all day, and what did the work do to their hands?

1913 · *Ford's Assembly Line*

34 Which place does this family go back to, and who took you there first?

1916 · *The Land That Outlasts Us*

Trial by Fire

35 Who went, who stayed — and what did they never talk about?

1917 · *America Enters the Great War*

36 Who was the first woman in this family to earn her own money?

1920 · *Women Win the Vote*

37 What did this family stay up all night for, before there was television?

1927 · *Lindbergh Crosses the Atlantic*

38 What did this family do when there was not enough, and what do we still do because of it?

1933–36 · *The Hungry Years*

39 Where were you when the news came, and who else was in the room?

1941 · *Pearl Harbor*

40 Who was overseas, and how did the letters come?

1944 · *D-Day*

41 What did this family think was the end of the world, and how long did the feeling last?

1945 · *The Bomb*

42 How did this family celebrate the day it ended?

1945 · *The War Ends*

The American Century

43 Which school did you go to — who else was in the room, and who was not?

1954 · *Brown v. Board of Education*

44 What did this family do every single day for a year, and why?

1955–56 · *Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*

45 What did the whole family watch together, crowded around one screen?

1962 · *John Glenn Orbits the Earth*

46 Which week were the adults frightened and trying not to show it?

1962 · *The Cuban Missile Crisis*

47 Was anyone here ever in a crowd that big, and what did it feel like?

1963 · *The March on Washington*

48 Where were you, and who told you?

1963 · *November 22 — Dallas*

49 What changed in this town — and how quickly did people get used to it?

1964 · *The Civil Rights Act*

50 What did this family believe until the day it stopped believing it?

1968 · *Tet*

51 Whose television was it, who was allowed to stay up, and who went outside afterwards?

1969 · *Apollo 11 — The Moon*

52 When did this family lose faith in something, and did it ever come back?

1974 · *A President Resigns*

53 What did you do on the Fourth of July in 1976?

1976 · *The Bicentennial*

Our Own Lifetimes

54 Whose name would this family go to find?

1982 · *The Wall That Names Them*

55 What were you doing when it happened, and what did the grown-up in the room do next?

1986 · *Challenger*

56 When did somebody here say the thing everyone told them not to say?

1987 · *"Tear Down This Wall"*

57 What did you never expect to see in your lifetime, and then saw?

1989 · *The Wall Comes Down*

58 Who did this family try to reach first, and how long did it take?

2001 · *September 11*

59 What did an ordinary Tuesday look like in this house — the shift, the school run, the meal, the hour the lights went off?

2020s · *The Nation Endures*

60 Who gave you this book, and who are you going to give it to?

2026 · *It Passes to You*