

Recording your Life Story

*presented 26 Oct 2002 to FamilyRoots 2002, Alberta Family Histories Society
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Genealogists and family historians spend countless hours searching for certificates, censuses, photographs, or anything that contains the tiniest bit of information about their ancestors. They want to learn more about the people they are related to. They fill out pedigree charts and family group records, and meet with distant cousins over the Internet. All of this is done with a longing to know more of their roots. How many of them wish that their ancestors had left behind the story of their lives?

How many of us have taken the time to collect our own certificates, photographs, memorabilia, and life stories and compile them into a personal history to be cherished by our own posterity? Don't leave a void next to your name, date, and place of birth on your family group record. Learn to write your own personal history, or help a loved one write theirs.¹

Why Write Your Personal History?

1. To ensure that your children, grandchildren and others will know you as a person.
2. To share personal stories with children and grandchildren as a gift.
3. To share incidents in your life that teach a lesson or tell of your triumphs over adversity, your recovery after a fall and your rejoicing when you finally achieved, providing inspiration to others facing a challenge.
4. To ensure that you, a unique individual, are not forgotten.
5. To discover who you are, to search for your own identity.

Never underestimate the value that your history will have to your posterity!!!!!!!

Where To Begin?

Writing a personal history of your entire life can seem like a daunting task. Perhaps the hardest part is knowing where to start. Don't try to do it all at once. Here are a few steps that will help break the process down into smaller manageable parts.

1. Decide who the Personal History will be about and for whom it will be written.

- Will it be a personal reflection of your own life, or the life of a close family member or friend?

¹ Amy J. Oaks Long, author of *From Shoeboxes to Books: Writing Great Personal Histories*.

- A story about an individual ancestor whose life experiences were adventurous, inspirational, or both?
- A story about your own life because there is something you want to say about it for others who could learn from it?
- Is it a gift to your family, a personal story for yourself, a contribution to a local historical magazine, or are you writing it for a commercial audience?
- What do you want others to know about you?
- What do you need to tell?
- How can you portray your life honestly and tell your deepest thoughts?

Working through these questions will enable you to write a personal history that is meaningful in the deepest sense.

2. Keep A Journal - Get in the habit of writing every day

- A journal is an excellent way to get started putting down thoughts and ideas.
- It helps improve writing skills.
- It provides personal accounts to add to your history.
- It records your thoughts and feelings at the time the event took place, not later, when impressions may be distorted.

3. Gather together photos, objects, documents, and other memorabilia.

- Going through old picture books and memorabilia can help you remember important events more clearly, and will provide documentation and interest to your memories.
- Store certificates, letters, photos, and other items in a waterproof box.
- Place acid-free folders in a box labelled with the following categories
- Childhood (0-11)
Adolescence (11-18)
Early Adulthood (18-25)
Prime Adulthood (25-45)
Middle Adult Years (45-65)
Later Adulthood (65-present)
- Suggested items to file in the box: birth and marriage certificates; blessing or christening documents; photographs of you, your parents and family; love letters from your spouse; a handwriting sample; genealogy forms; graduation announcements; newspaper articles of important events; stories told in letters and thank you notes; calendars; day books; financial statements; family rules; vignettes; favourite recipes; passports; and journals.

TIP: Using the correct types of materials will help preserve your memorabilia and keep items from sticking to or ruining other keepsakes through acid migration. Protect precious documents and photographs by placing them in acid-free pockets before you place them in the folder. These pockets are 8 ½" by 11" and are usually made of polypropylene- or polyethylene-plastics, which are chemically stable and used

primarily in the manufacturing of photographic sleeves. If you place more than one photograph or document in a pocket, insert a piece of acid-free paper between each document and photograph to keep them from touching each other.

4. Involve Family and Friends

Involve your family and friends in the process of creating your personal history. (It will help ensure that you have an audience of interested readers who are connected to the completed work.)

- Ask family members to contribute their favourite stories concerning the subject. (i.e.: ask your mother about what you were like as a baby)
- Ask family members to collect photos, stories, and memorabilia that might be appropriate for use in the book.
- Request the completion of a short biography (3 to 5 pages) of their own family that includes names, birth dates, significant events, and a recent family photograph (4x6 works nicely) including all names of individuals in the picture from left to right.

5. Record Oral History

Creating an oral history is often easier than sitting at a computer and typing the stories of a person's life. If you are doing a biography of a living person, an oral history is a must. If it is your history, you may have a child, spouse, or friend interview you or you may talk into the tape recorder yourself.

- Space the interviews over a few days so as not to tire the person being interviewed.
- Begin a session by telling one or two additional stories relating to the subject of the prior interview.
- Devote each (1 ½ hour maximum) interview to a specific time period or subject.
- Use a good tape recorder
- Include musical talent or dramatic talent.

TIP: It is best to have one whole tape dedicated to memories of an interviewee's children. By promising the interviewee that one entire session will be devoted to his/her children, it will be easier to have the interviewee focus on his/her own life stories rather than spending the interview time telling stories about his/her children.

Interview Questions: <http://users.mywebnet.com/tmason1/story.pdf>

6. Write the First Draft of Your Personal History

- Write an outline of the major aspects in your life that you especially want to record.
- General Age Periods
 - Childhood (0-12)
 - Adolescence (12-18)
 - Early Adulthood (18-25)
 - Prime Adulthood (25-45)
 - Middle Adult Years (45-65)
 - Later Adulthood (65-present)
- Other Topics and Sub-Topics to include
 - Memories of your children
 - Community Service
 - Health Record
 - Physical Characteristics
 - Social Life
 - Religion
 - Memorable World Events
 - Military Service
 - Education
 - Vocation
 - Counsel to Posterity
- Organize your thoughts by using memory triggers (A memory trigger is a word, phrase, sentence, story, photograph, question or anything else that jogs your mind into recalling important information.)
- Write as the thoughts come to you.
- Don't worry if it is out of order. You can organize it later.
- Start with the topic that you've been wanting most to record.
- Be honest about your life.
- Transfer an emotional experience to the reader (e.g., *frustration, anticipations, amusement, pleasure, pity, envy, humility, gratitude, boredom, greed, pride, etc.*)
- Include real events. Include tragic, exciting, and normal every day things.
- Use a word processor to record your writing for easy editing.

7. Add Photos and Scanned Images

- Decide which items you will use. Ask yourself:
 - Would I find that item useful or interesting if it were in someone else's history?
 - Would it be as effective to simply describe the item rather than include it in the book?
- Choose best quality and most typical images to use in a personal history.
- Achieve an appropriate balance between visual imagery and text.

- If using a digital camera, record photos on the highest resolution.

8. Make Your Personal History User Friendly

Organize in the following Sections:

- Title Page
 - First Page after cover
 - Contains the Title (and Sub-Title) in as few words as possible
 - The Edition number (if more than one edition)
 - Your name and the names of other authors and editors
 - The place and date of publication
- Copyright Statement
 - Usually on back of the title page
 - Includes information on publishing date and who to contact for more information
 - Example: Copyright 1998 by Thomas Alan Smith. All rights reserved.
- Table of Contents
 - List of chapters and section with page numbers
 - An outline and guide for readers to find sections of most interest
- Dedication
 - Contains the name of the person/persons to whom you are dedicating the history and why
 - Usually written on the page after the copyright page
- List of Illustrations
 - Contains the name and page number of each picture, map, or illustration in the family history
- Foreword
 - A statement about the history written by someone other than you or the editor.
- Preface
 - A statement written by you
 - Describe why you wrote the history
 - Provides an overview of the history's scope, content, and organization
 - Outlines the research methods used.
 - Provides an address for readers who wish to contact you
- Acknowledgments
 - Shows gratitude to persons or institutions who helped
- List of Abbreviations
 - Contains the abbreviations you have used in your family history and their meanings.
- Introduction
 - Contains background or historical information that may be needed to understand the family history.

- List of Contributors
 - Lists the names of the people who helped write the family history.
- Chronology
 - Provides dates and descriptions of key events in a family history.
 - It give readers an overview of the events that shaped the person's life
 - Provides a quick reference to important events
 - Particularly useful if your history is not arranged chronologically
- Main Body
 - Usually divided into several sections or chapters
 - Can be divided according to time period
 - Can use divider pages to separate the chapters.
 - May contain footnotes, endnotes, etc.
 - Should include illustrations, photographs, maps, or copies of records and certificates.
- Appendices
 - Contains information that is not essential to the main body of text
 - May be useful to readers who want more specific information about a topic. Examples: family group sheets and pedigree charts, and similar items.
 - Bibliography
 - Lists the sources used in writing your history.
- Index
 - A list of individuals, place-names, and subjects mentioned your history.

9. Edit and Finalize Your Personal History

- Ask your spouse or a good friend to read through your history to suggest revisions and identify necessary corrections.
- Ask for constructive ideas on how to make your history easier to understand.
- Be sure that the fonts you use are easy to read and photocopy well.
- Obtain permission to include information about people who were born in the last 100 years.
- Complete your history now-do not put it on hold while seeking absolute perfection.

10. Printing and Binding

- Call a few potential publishers and printers to compare cost and quality of service and to find out their requirements for publishing a personal history. To obtain an estimate for a full life story, plan for a book of 200 pages including images with enough copies to distribute to your parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren (and a few extras).

- Use a publisher that prints copies from a file you've saved to a disk. Each copy will then be as good as the original. Contact your publisher to find out what file format they prefer. Most publishers will accept files in recent versions of Microsoft Word, Corel WordPerfect and other widely used word processing programs. Extra care should be taken to ensure that the end product is acceptable and correct.
- Always have your history printed on acid-free paper. 20 lb. paper is acceptable, but 24 lb. is better. Double-sided printing is preferable.
- All photographs and images should be copied into black and white images. Black and white images will preserve much longer than colour images.
- If you want to spend more, you can have your history printed by an offset publisher. The quality will be better, but the additional quality may not be justified by the significant additional cost.
- There are many different types of binding available for your personal history. Ask your publisher to see samples of the types of binding they offer. Most publishers will show you a variety of bindings. Having your history hard bound with a sewn binding is not a requirement, however, it will last longer than other types of binding. Your goal is to publish and distribute your history, regardless of how it is bound.
- If available, have your publisher archive your history for you. Many publishers will offer a one-time storage fee and keep it for you in digital form, which you may use later to make additional copies. Or, if you prefer, save it to a cd and store in your safety deposit box.

12. Share Your History

Consider:

- Publishing several extra books for future generations. Posterity should have easy access to your history.
- Selling it.
- Donating copies to libraries or other institutions.
- Posting it on the internet
- Donate a copy to the Salt Lake Family History Library
 - Give permission to microfilm using a Permission to Duplicate form
 - Send a letter of permission with your manuscript
 - Send an unbound copy as it's easier to microfilm

Strangers in the Box²

Come, look with me inside this drawer,
In this box I've often seen,
At the pictures, black and white,
Faces proud, still, serene.

I wish I knew the people,
These strangers in the box,
Their names and all their memories
Are lost among my socks.

I wonder what their lives were like.
How did they spend their days?
What about their special times?
I'll never know their ways.

If only someone had taken time
To tell who, what, where, when,
These faces of my heritage
Would come to life again.

Could this become the fate
Of the pictures we take today?
The faces and the memories
Someday to be tossed away?

Make time to save your pictures,
Seize the opportunity when it knocks,
Or someday you and yours could be
The strangers in the box.

"In 1997, I authored the poem titled, "Strangers in the Box." I originally wrote the poem when my mother had dementia, and I realized that the stories she loved to tell me about her youth and her family were locked inside her, and I didn't remember them like I was so sure I always would. Hence, the box of strangers." (Pamela Harazin).

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MEMORY TRIGGERS

Try answering one or more of the following questions, and then give examples. Let your mind wander as you answer, and write down or record memories that come to mind whether they fit the topic or not. Things can always be sorted out later!

1. Where were you born and what were the circumstances of your birth? Were there other children already in the family? How did your parents choose your name?
2. Where did you go to school? Did you have any memorable teachers? What were your favourite subjects?
3. What were your favourite activities as a young child? Were you interested in sports?
4. How did you celebrate birthdays as a child?
5. What were your childhood home and neighbourhood like?
6. What were your grandparents like? Do you have any special memories of them? Do you remember any stories that they told you about themselves or your parents?
7. What were your parents like? Did you have a special relationship with either of them? Do you know anything about them when they were children?
8. What was your personality like? Are you the same, or did something happen to change you? How would you describe your personality now?
9. Did you have brothers and sisters? What did you do together as children? What are some of your special memories of growing up together?
10. What kind of chores did you do around the house? What were your favourite or least favourite chores?
11. Did you have a favourite radio program or television show?
12. How did you spend your Sundays as a child?
13. Who was your favourite singer, band or musical group when you were a teenager?
14. Did you ever do anything rebellious?
15. What was your most memorable Christmas? How did your family celebrate?
16. How did you celebrate Thanksgiving? Where did you go? What was your favourite dish?
17. Who was your best childhood friend? Where are they now?
18. What is the lowest price you remember stamps costing? What did other things cost?
19. What kind of job did your father have? What do you remember about it? Did your mother work outside of the home?
20. Did you graduate from High School? Did you go on to school after that? What did you study?
21. What was your first job, and what did you get paid?
22. What was your favourite practical joke as a child? Did you ever get in trouble for playing jokes?
23. Have you ever gone far away? What was the farthest place you ever went to?
24. Did you ever run away as a child, even for a few hours? Did you ever plan to?

25. What is the best book ever written? How many times have you read it?
26. Who was your favourite movie actor or actress? What is your favourite movie?
27. Do you and your spouse have a special song? What is the story behind it?
28. What was the first house that you lived in together like? How big was it?
29. What was your first car? What was the car that you really wanted?
30. Did you grow up near your extended family? Did you get to spend time together?
31. What was your childhood nickname? What did your dad call you? Your mom? What did they call you when you were in trouble?
32. Did you ever get sent home from school? Did you ever get sent to the principal?
33. Did you have a pet as a child?
34. Who was your first boyfriend/girlfriend? What did you do for dates?
35. In your opinion, what was the best invention of your lifetime? Automobile? Washing machine? Air conditioning? Indoor plumbing?
36. Describe a typical weekday as a child. Were Saturdays the same?
37. Did you attend church? What was your church like? Did you have to travel far to get there?
38. What was the most exciting trip you've ever taken?
39. What is your favourite season? Why?
40. What was your favourite dinner that your mother made? What was the worst?
41. Did you play an instrument? Were you in a band or an orchestra? Did you sing?
42. What was your hairstyle as a teenager? What kind of clothes did you wear? Were you always in style?
43. What was your favourite holiday? Why? Has that changed?
44. What is the most important lesson that you've learned from life so far?
45. Do you speak more than one language? If so, how and why did you learn it? If not, did you ever want to?
46. How far was it to your school? Did you have to walk? Was it uphill both ways?
47. What is a special talent you have? Fixing things? Sewing? Handiwork? Green thumb? When did you realize that you loved it and how did you learn?
48. What is one thing that you couldn't do, no matter how hard you tried?
49. What were your favourite winter activities? What did you do in the summertime?
50. What was the best letter that you ever received? What was the best letter that you ever sent?
51. Describe your posterity (children, grandchildren, etc). What is the thing that you want them most to remember about you.
52. Describe your wedding day. Where did you get married? Why? Who came? Did you have a honeymoon? How did you meet?

Resource List

Internet

- *Bits of Ivory Personal History Resources* www.bitsofivory.com/
- *My Personal History : A series by Laura Falcon*
www.thefamily.com/genealogy/familyhistoryseries.html
- *Personal History Help.com* <http://personalhistoryhelp.com/>
- *A Personal History Website* - www.apersonalhistory.com/
- *Memory Grabber,*
www.usedbooksandebbooks.com/ebooks/memorygrabber.html

Books and Publications

- Amy J. Oaks Long, *From Shoeboxes to Books: Writing Great Personal Histories*
- Patricia Law Hatcher, CG, *Producing a Quality Family History*
- Joan R. Neubauer, *From Memories to Manuscript - The Five-Step Method of Writing Your Life Story*
- *Preparing a Family History*, LDS Resource Guide, Item # 36023, Free at the Calgary Family History Centre
- *Preparing a Personal History.*, William Hartley, Salt Lake City, Utah: Primer Publications, 1976, (10th printing, 1996).
- Kirk Polking, *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs*, Betterway Books, Cincinnati Ohio, 1995
- *Pathways From the Past, Doorways to the Future, A Biography Guide*, Produced by Friends of Seniors, \$20.00, Contact Brenda Wood (249-0853)

Software

- *Notable Personal History and Journal Software* - www.startmyjournal.com - P.O. Box 673, Roy, UT 84067-0673
- *Daily Journal - Parsons Technology* - Available at Beehive Bookstore, \$43.50

Other

- *Sound History, Record Your Family History*, 39 Springshire Place, Calgary, Alberta T3Z 3L2, (403) 630-8855, Fax: (403) 249-9744