Writing Personal and Family Histories—2006

by Taylor Macdonald

"Each time a person dies without his or her history being preserved, it's as if an entire library burned down." African proverb

Introduction

Personal and family histories help build and strengthen relationships. Building relationships is vitally important, especially relationships with our family members, close and distant, living and dead.

Goals of this Class

(1) To make you all feel capable and competent to write a personal or family history.

(2) Help you obtain a desire, when you leave here, to write a personal or family history.

Why Family and Personal Histories are Important—Your Own and Your Ancestors'

Help us and our children realize we are part of a chain of people who came before us, and there will be a continuation of people after us. Those who lived before us are real people, but they become "real" only if we learn about them, and we can learn about them only if someone has written a history. Similarly, we will be "real" to our own descendants only if they can read about us.

1. Histories help strengthen relationships.

2. Histories help us keep track of the ups and downs of our own life. There is also the phenomenon of not always understanding the significance of certain events in our lives until afterwards when we look back on them. We can better look back and learn if we have histories to read.

4. Histories of ordinary people are just as important as the histories of prominent people and leaders.

5. "One of the major reasons why we need to find out as much as we can about our ancestors is so that we may interpret ourselves through them. Family history is important because our families are the extension of ourselves back infinitely and forward infinitely. It is by virtue of them that we are individuals. We do not act alone. The antecedents of our actions go back to our ancestors – what they have done, what they have passed on to us in the way of sin and in the way of virtue. And the consequences of our actions go forward to our descendants....That is why we have to *thank* our ancestors (that is one side of it) and to *forgive* them (that is the other side of it); and why our children will have to *thank* us and *forgive* us." (Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart*)

Eight Unacceptable Excuses for Not Preparing Your Own or Someone Else's Life History

1. I'm not a writer
2. My life is boring
3. I never did anything worth writing about
4. There are sad or embarrassing things in my life
5. No one is interested in my life history
6. I can't remember much of anything interesting
7. I don't know how to get started or how to organize it
8. It's too difficult and confusing

Getting Started on a Recorded Oral History

1. Buy a cassette recorder and get a sack of blank tapes. Then talk till you're hoarse!
2. Label each tape. (Unlabeled tapes get erased, recorded over, or thrown out.)
3. Don't be self-conscious, and don't worry if you sound funny on the tape. Just talk!
4. Don't worry about getting things out of order, or interrupting yourself, starting over, etc. Just talk!
5. What to include? Everything! Give lots of details. Don't just talk about the big events in your life, include big things, little things, everyday things, happy, sad things, problems, and successes.
6. Use videocameras, if available. No one cares if they are professional quality. Just do them.

Writing About Sad or Difficult Events

Every person and family has problems and challenges. You can choose what to include and what to omit in your history. However, knowing how you or others handled and coped with problems may help those who come after to keep their own problems in perspective. You don't have to go into every detail of a difficult event, but you can briefly describe it, your feelings about it, what it means to you now, and what you learned from it. Mistakes, problems, and trials are a major part of life. Don't dwell on them, but you don't have to make people look perfect. **Caution**: Above all, don't let fear of a difficult event prevent you from writing a history. As a general rule, follow Alex Haley's advice: "Look for the good and praise it."

A Word About Perfectionism

Perfectionists are people who strain toward impossible goals that often end up obstructing their accomplishments. Perfectionism is not necessarily desirable or a sign of high achievement. You may do an outstanding job on your life history if you aim for just a good narrative rather than a masterpiece that produces stress and perhaps prevents you from achieving your goal.

Caution: Avoid the urge to constantly revise as you write your rough draft; the compulsive search for perfection will keep you from ever completing a manuscript.

Six Steps to Writing a Personal or Family History

1. PLAN. Decide the scope of your history:

- Life of one person
- Story of a nuclear family: a couple and their children
- Multi-generational history
- Collection of histories on the ancestors of a certain individual
- Collection of histories on the descendants of a certain individual

2. RESEARCH. How to begin your research depends on whom you are writing about.

Researching your personal history. In writing your own history, research will usually start with your memory. To get your memories out of your head and onto paper, you can:

- Make audiotapes as previously described, then type and organize the transcripts.
- Write in long hand then get the manuscript typed, preferably on a computer.
- Gather with your brothers, sisters, cousins, or old friends, then reminisce. They will remember things you forgot (or perhaps never knew), and will spark your memory. Record these conversations or have someone take notes.
- If possible, schedule several of these sessions, for as you talk and reminisce, things will return to your memory that you have not thought of in 50 years. When the first session is over, memories will continue to flood your mind. Capture them.
- Be sure to get the details for each story or event, if possible: date, place, people involved, time of year, etc. This will add richness and credibility to your finished history.

Researching an ancestor's history. This requires more work.

- Assemble what information you have in one place—a binder, file, box.
- Determine what key information is missing, devise a plan for obtaining it.

-County histories. Most U.S. counties have published histories with surprising amount of detail about early settlers, maps, property plats. You may find when your ancestors moved in or out, the exact location of their property. Many are microfilmed in the FHL and available at Family History Centers.

-Other local histories and biographies
-Surname genealogies and histories
-Gazetteers
-Censuses
-Land records
-Military records
-Immigration records
-Wills
-Social Security Death Index
-Letters, diaries, family documents
-Newspapers
-Family History Department Research Outlines
-Internet. Use search engines for names and places. Add key sites to Bookmarks or Favorites.

Take good notes. It's discouraging to have to go back and repeat steps because you didn't take good notes to start with. Include full information on your source: title, author, publisher, publication place, year, ***page number***, microfilm number, location of the source, file number—in short, whatever is necessary for someone coming along behind you to be able to locate that same information. Photocopy documents whenever possible. State name and date of personal interviews or conversations. Give date, author, and location of letters, diaries, and newspaper articles. *You must simply plunge in and learn as you go.* ***Tip:*** Gather the basic information you have, go to a library, walk in, and start asking questions. ***Tip:*** Learn about Inter-library Loan, even overseas. If you have a public or academic library nearby, pay for a user card.

If you make a research trip, plan ahead. Write the people and offices you wish to visit and ask to meet with them and for other guidance. It's a waste of time to travel a great distance only to find the library closed that day, the librarian on vacation, or some other unforseen obstacle. By writing or calling ahead, you can be put in contact with local historians and historical societies who are often a gold mine of information. They are usually enthusiastic helpers.

Caution: Research is fun; you can do it forever. But at some point you must cease research and start writing.

3. ORGANIZE. For many this is the most difficult part, turning raw data into a finished biography. To start, a chronological system usually makes sense (You may change it later).

- Place all your raw research data in chronological order in folders, in a file drawer, or tabs in a binder. If your history is long, one long continuous file may become unwieldy. In that case, sub-divide into several major periods, Period 1, Period 2, Period 3, etc.
- After gathering the raw data, put the information on 5" x 7" file cards or in "chronology blocks" on your word processor. Date of the event in the upper left corner, the complete bibliographical source information in upper right corner. Then the information itself taken from a research source (county history, census, newspaper article, oral interview, etc.).
- Continue in this way as long as necessary, adding cards or computer "note blocks" as you gather new raw information. You may end up with hundreds of these cards or note blocks stored in a box or on your hard drive. (***Life & death caution***: ALWAYS BACK UP YOUR COMPUTER FILES ON DISKETTE OR CD OR ZIP DISK OR SOMETHING!)

For a long history, a purely chronological organization as the final form may not work. You may have to divide your subject's life into topical

threads, and double back once in a while, for example:

1 Husband's birth and childhood
2. Husband's youth and education
3. Husband's family background

[Temporarily leave the husband's life]

3. Wife's birth and childhood
4. Wife's youth and education
5. Wife's family background
6. Husband and wife meet, court, marry
7. Husband and wife meet, court, marry

[Joint history from this point on]

8. Husband's work as farmer
9. Husband's work as miner
10. Husband's final work as mill worker

[Flash back to:]

11. Family life: children, family stories, illnesses & injuries, family activities, home descriptions
12.Husband's community & church activities, hobbies, clubs, service organizations.

[Flash back again:]

13.Wife's activities, hobbies, career
14. Final years, retirement, illnesses, missions, deaths, funerals, obituaries
15. Others' memories of the deceased
16. Summing up

4. WRITE. You now have the building blocks to create your history; just link all these cards or chronology blocks together. You will now change the sterile dates and facts into a living chronicle for future generations. There are two major formats:

A. CHRONOLOGY

This is a list of dates and events. A possible finished product. Even if you stop with a chronology, you will be providing a great family history service. As you can see, it doesn't require writing or organization skills. However, if you wish you can use this chronology as skeleton for creating a full-blown narrative.

B. NARRATIVE HISTORY

Besides, the chronology described above, another option is to write a narrative history, what we usually think of as a family history or biography. You can use the chronology you've just constructed as a starting point, then write transitions from card to card (or block to block). You can organize it into parts or sections or chapters. The hard work—researching, taking notes, preserving sources, and organizing—is already done. The remaining task is largely one of writing.

Try to focus your writing: identify exactly what you're trying to say, then write it that way. Include stories and anecdotes.

Chapter Titles. Write chapter headings that are descriptive. Good chapter headings will allow your readers to read the Table of Contents and search the history more easily. Short chapters are usually more inviting to the reader than long ones.

Subheadings. (Like this one.) Within chapters, it's helpful to insert subheadings every so often to allow your reader to track and skim easily. Remember, most readers will not read your book just once, but will return to it as a reference many times looking for a specific event, story or date.

Photos, maps, genealogical charts, drawings. Use them copiously.

Captions. The most read parts of your history will be your captions. Spend time composing them with great care. Don't do them in a hurry or off-handedly, and don't write under a photo: "Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt Belle, cousin Bob, and the kids." Their names may be well known to you, but down the road, readers unacquainted with them will be frustrated. In addition, add all the information you can about the photo, for example, when and where it was taken, the significance of the photo.

Footnotes, Bibliography, Index. These are not options; they are requirements even for the most amateur family historian. Without sources and attributions, your work will merit little regard. Even if your source is an oral interview or telephone conversation, state the source, the participants, and the date the conversation took place.

Letters. Letters are a wonderful source of family history, for they lend a sense of immediacy and reality to your history. But letters tend to cover many subjects in one document, so be sure to quote only the passage of the letter that applies to the topic at hand. If the entire letter or even a series of letters are important, include them in their entirety in an appendix at the end of your history.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

Your own style. Don't become self-conscious or try to use language that is too high sounding. It is especially important to be relaxed about your writing in the early draft stage. Revision will be the key to a satisfactory finished product. Seek to transfer a picture or an emotional experience to your readers in plain language.

Keep the narration moving forward. Your reader will feel more comfortable and be more willing to read your history if you give the feeling that you are moving the story along. Keep up a brisk pace, and only take a detour for background or context when necessary.

Background and context. Keep the narrative moving, but if you feel that it is important to insert some background or context, you then take the reader on a *short* detour to explain the circumstances behind the family's decision to uproot themselves from their ancestral homelands where they and their forebears had lived for centuries. It requires judgement on when and how much of this kind of background information to include. As a general rule, keep focused on your main subject, and include only enough information to give meaning or understanding to the narrative. If you feel more information would be interesting or necessary, place it in an appendix or a long end note rather than in your main narrative.

Stop and paint an occasional picture. While keeping the narrative moving, bear in mind that it may enrich your history to give a more detailed description or tell a story once in a while. If a Scottish parish is important because it is the cradle of your extended family, you may want to describe it and include interesting quotes from other travelers or histories about the region. Describe the crumbling ruins of an ancestral castle, for example, but make it short and return to your main story.

Beginning, middle, and end. Good beginnings are often the hardest to come up with, and endings the next hardest.

Good beginning. Try a startling statement, an unexpected revelation. Use a family symbol to start; or use the family as a symbol. Start with a family photo and a family assumption about it. Action and suspense make a good beginning. Use a characterization of your ancestor or yourself to start. A "sense of place or time" can be a good starting point. Start with a short anecdote or a colorful quote from a letter or start with a crisis.

5. EDIT. When your history is essentially in the desired form, make copies and send it to several people to read and comment. You can usually find experienced people within your circle of family and friends to read it for free. Or you can find a professional editor to read it for pay. Be sure to agree on a price or a rate up front. It's essential that you let your manuscript sit for a while and cool off. Then when you return to it, you can look at it with fresh eyes and more objectivity. You and your readers will find awkward phrases, ambiguities, inconsistencies, and confusing passages that you will be happy to discover before your history is printed in final form.

Caution: Avoid the urge to constantly revise *as you write* your rough draft; the compulsive search for perfection will keep you from ever completing a manuscript. Save editing for later.

Epilogue. When the main narrative is completed, add information of interest that may fall out of the range of your history. Perhaps indicate that this history is the first of a series, and invite others to contribute.

Appendix. Important and interesting information that would disrupt the flow of your history if you were placing it in the main narrative. Can include genealogical charts, family group sheets, facsimile reproductions of special documents, expanded details on certain elements of the history, town histories, etc.

Bibliography. List of sources, their authors, and location. Required!

Index. List of names, places, events, ideas with the pages in the history where they can be found. Required!

6. PRINT. There are many ways and prices for printing your history. Shop around, visit printers and copy shops. Ask questions, get samples of paper and bindings, and demos, prices, and time frames. Ask about different processes and costs of reproducing your photos. ***Tip:*** Take nothing for granted! Don't assume the printer knows that the index comes at the end of the book or that the pages are numbered all the way to the end of the history. Don't assume what your cover will look like; ask for a mock-up or an actual sample of the cover or title page. Don't assume that the binder knows how to spell your name on the cover or spine. Don't assume anything!

Final form of your history:

- Photocopied, Docutek or offset printing
- Binding: stapled, spiral, other
- Soft cover, hard cover
- CD-ROM or web site

USEFUL BOOKS AND CDs

1. Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History, Sturdevant

2. The Elements of Style, Strunk & White

3. Keys to Great Writing, Wilbers

4. Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in the 1800s, McCutcheon (others in this series)

5. A to Zax: A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists & Historians, Evans

6. Family History CD, published by The Jefferson Project, www.familyhistorycd.com, 431 E. 2700 N., Ogden, UT 84414. (Software to publish your history on CD)

USEFUL WEB SITES:

1. www.whitepages.com

2. www.dexonline.com

3. www.mapquest.com

4. http://uk2.multimap.com (U.K.)

5. www.old-maps.co.uk (U.K.)

6. www.ellisislandrecords.org

7. Utah's Catalog
www.lib.utah.edu/kvk/index-b.html
(Searches every college library in Utah plus UNLV)