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Preserve Your Family History by Writing Your Family Stories

By LeAnn R. Ralph

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Preserve Your Family History by Writing Family Stories

"Everyone has a story to tell." It seems like a cliché—but it's true. After working as a newspaper reporter for more than eight years, I know that everyone does, indeed, have a story to tell.

But even before I started working as a journalist, I knew that life experiences make interesting stories. Consider my parents.

My mother was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants, and her grandfather homesteaded our dairy farm in Wisconsin in the late 1800s. My father was the son of German and Scottish immigrants. When Dad was a little boy, his parents worked as cooks in a lumber camp in northern Wisconsin. As I was growing up, Mom and Dad would tell stories about their own childhoods. When Mom was a little girl, the whole family would sleep in the screen porch on hot summer nights. Indians also used to stop at our farm, and gypsies would camp nearby during the summer. When Dad was a little boy, he enjoyed spending time at the lumber camp kitchen because all of the cooks knew that little boys needed special treats during the day: a piece of Key-Lime pie, a slice of chocolate cake, or a couple of extra-large sugar cookies. When Dad wasn't staying with his parents at the lumber camp, he lived with his grandmother, a tiny tough-as-nails German woman who owned a German shepherd named Happy.

Unfortunately, I never wrote down any of those stories, and I never asked Mom and Dad to sit down with a tape recorder and tell those stories. My mother died in 1985 at the age of 68, and my father passed away in 1992 at the age of 78. The majority of their stories, except for the few that I remember, are lost forever. Your family stories do not have to share the same fate.

Here are some tips for writing your family stories: Decide which person you want to interview first (Grandma or Grandpa, Mom or Dad, Aunt or Uncle), and then tell that person about your plan to write a collection of family stories and ask for permission to conduct an interview. Set a formal date and

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time for the interview. This will give your interviewee an opportunity to mentally prepare and to remember various stories that he or she would like to talk about. Provide a list of questions several days or weeks before the interview. This will also give your interviewee time to remember various stories. Focus on a single subject or event in your list of questions—school, holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July), birthdays, seasons (spring, summer, winter, fall)—the list is endless. Ask open-ended questions and not "yes or no" questions. "How did you get to school?" is better than "Did you walk to school when you were growing up?" Use a tape recorder to record the interview. Taping the interview will help you gather details that you might miss if you are only taking notes. Chat about something else for a while if the person you are interviewing seems nervous at the prospect of being tape-recorded. Your interviewee will soon relax and won't even notice the tape recorder. And once you start the interview, you will find that one subject will lead to another and one question will lead to another. Transcribe the tape and write up your notes after you have finished the interview. This, in itself, will provide a fine record of the stories that are told "in their own words." And you will be in good company—Studs Terkel's oral history books are written that way, and they are fascinating to

read. Terkel's books include *Division Street* (1967), *Hard Times* (1970), *Working* (1974), *The Good War* (1984), *The Great Divide* (1988), and *RACE* (1992). After you have finished all of your interviews and have written down the stories, print the stories from your computer and put them into a three-ring binder. Make multiple copies and give them to family members as gifts. Or you might want to consider publishing the stories POD (print-on-demand). There are many POD companies, and for a price that starts out at a couple of hundred dollars, you can publish the stories as a trade paperback. To find POD companies, conduct an Internet search with the keywords, "print-on-demand."

Here are some examples of questions to help you get started with your interviews:

Subject: school Where did you go to school when you were growing up? Tell me about any amusing or unusual incidents that happened on your way to or from school. What kinds of clothes did you wear? How many students were in your class? How many students were in the whole school? How many grades? What was your favorite subject? Why? What was your least-favorite subject? Why? Who was your favorite teacher? Why? Who was your least-favorite teacher? Why? Tell me about your best friend. Tell me about your happiest moments in school. What was your best accomplishment? Tell me about your worst moments in school. Did you learn anything from your worst moments? What advice would you give to students who are in school today?

LeAnn R. Ralph is a freelance writer for two newspapers in west central Wisconsin, is the editor of the Wisconsin Regional Writer (the quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Assoc.) and is the author of the book, *Christmas In Dairyland (True Stories From a Wisconsin Farm)* (Aug. 2003); trade paperback. For more information about *Christmas In Dairyland*, visit

13 Steps to Preserve Your Family History

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Although the phrase, "everybody has a story to tell" may sound like a cliché, it's true.

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And after working as a newspaper reporter for nine years, I know that everyone does, indeed, have a story to tell, including your family members.

Think about it.

Do your grandmother and grandfather — mother and father — aunts and uncles — tell stories about the "good old days?"

Do they talk about going to school? The fun they had with friends? Family celebrations and holidays? Picnics on the Fourth of July? Snow that was so deep it covered fences? Pets that were so smart they belonged in the Guinness Book of World Records? Making ice cream? Their parents? Their grandparents?

Have you wanted to write down those stories to share them with other family members and to preserve them for generations to come but don't know how to go about it?

Guess what? You don't need "literary talent," special training or special equipment. All you need to preserve those stories is a list of people to interview, a willingness to listen, a set of questions to ask, a tape recorder and a computer (or even a typewriter would work!).

Here are the steps for gathering and writing your family stories:

1. Decide which people you would like to interview and make a list.
2. Ask for permission to conduct an interview.
3. Set a formal date and time for the interview.
4. Provide a list of questions several days or weeks before the interview.
5. Focus on a single subject or event in each list of questions.
6. Use the "who, what, where, when, how, and why" strategy when formulating your questions.
7. Ask open-ended questions and not "yes or no" or "one word answer" questions.
8. Use a tape recorder to record the interview.
9. Chat about something else for a while if the person you are interviewing seems nervous at the prospect of being tape-recorded.
10. Transcribe the tape and write up your notes after you have finished the interview.
11. Edit the manuscript.

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12. Spread out your interviews.

13. Print the stories from your computer or publish them in another way.

Preserve Your Family History includes step-by-step instructions for conducting interviews as well as 30 sets of questions (more than 400 questions in all) on 30 different topics that you can print out to use "as is" or that you can use to generate your own questions. To see the table of contents and several sets of sample questions visit ---

Preserve Your Family History (A Step-by-Step Guide for Writing Oral Histories) (66 pages; \$7.95) is available from

From the e-book: Preserve Your Family History (A Step-by-Step Guide for Writing Oral Histories) (66 pages; April 2004; \$7.95) available at ---

To see the table of contents and several sets of sample questions visit ---

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LeAnn R. Ralph is the author of the book, *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* (trade paperback; August 2003). For more information, visit

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