

2009 Backgrounder on the Association of Personal Historians

For Immediate Release

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Personal Historians Save Lives — One Story at a Time

Summary

- A rapidly growing network of members in the Association of Personal Historians Inc. (APH) helps families and communities preserve their histories.
- APH members around the world produce stories in a variety of formats, with projects typically priced from a few hundred to several thousand dollars.
- Personal historians come to the field with an array of educational levels and professional skills.
- Gerontologists now recognize reminiscence and life review as normal stages of maturation, allowing older adults to realize the meaning and value of their lives.
- Paula Stahel, APH president, and Pat McNees, APH vice-president, share insights into the value of saving personal, family, and organizational stories.
- The media find APH members and projects to be a continuing source of engaging and informative story ideas.

Do you know the story of your grandparents' lives? Do the young people in your family know the stories of their elders and ancestors? Or do they know more about the celebrity couple-of-the-month than they do about their own blood relatives? Is your community or organization fostering future growth by preserving its past?

Many of us say we want to find the time to interview aging family members or record our own life stories, but we put off doing it — often until it is too late, when those who lived the stories are too frail to tell them, memories have faded, or their voices are silenced forever.

Increasing awareness

Interest in genealogy has escalated over the past decade, but genealogists soon realize that what is missing from the data they collect are the stories that put flesh on the bones of their ancestors. And two things keep them from preserving what stories they can — lack of time, and lack of skill.

The good news is that more than 600 members of the Association of Personal Historians Inc. (APH) are available to help. Founded as a U.S. organization in 1995, APH now has members throughout North America, as well as in Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, China, Belgium, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

“The common thread among personal historians,” says Stahel, “is a passion for saving personal stories, one story at a time. We all believe that to understand who we are, we must understand who we came from. Knowing the stories of our families — whether we love them or not — provides a perspective on what we have done and can do in our own lives.”

An independent writer for more than 25 years, Stahel operates Breath and Shadows Productions in Tampa, Fla., and also teaches life writing and memoir courses. “There were fewer than 75 members when I became active in APH in 1998,” she said. “When I told people then that I specialized as a personal historian, the first question was: ‘A what?’ Now, most people know what it is we do. Everyone I meet is interested in preserving the story of a family member or tells me with excitement of having done so. More often, though, people lament that it’s too late — their parents or grandparents are gone, or dementia has stolen the memories. There’s a deep sense of grief when the stories are lost forever.”

More than just individual stories

“Story-catching is not just for families,” says APH Vice President Pat McNees, who teaches a course on life stories and legacy writing at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Md. She has helped write memoirs of clients such as a Philadelphia pediatrician and of a Connecticut engineer who managed research and development on America’s nuclear submarines. McNees also has written many organizational histories, including that of a lift truck firm in Ohio, the

Young Presidents Organization, and the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center — the nation’s research hospital. “Companies and organizations also want their stories told, for all kinds of reasons. Often it’s easier for someone to come from the outside to ask the ‘dumb’ questions that elicit an interesting, worthwhile story.”

“Compiling a corporate history or personal life story can be a daunting task,” Stahel points out. “Most people don’t know where or how to start. Plus, emotional dynamics can affect the outcome when dealing with our own family members.”

A professional personal historian has the skills to help even the most reluctant storyteller share a fascinating story or valuable lesson. Along with getting the narrator’s story through interviews, a personal historian will often do research to place the individual’s story in historical perspective. Working with a skilled member of APH turns the process from overwhelming to energizing.

“Cultural and ethnic backgrounds also influence the process,” Stahel adds. “Descendants of European backgrounds gravitate toward recording their stories in print, and ethical wills are an important part of the Jewish tradition. Native North Americans and African-Americans tend toward oral history. Many cultures pass down their stories through song and performance art. And now, people of all ages are embracing new technologies as ways of sharing their stories with others.”

Professional skills affect results

While the rich and famous have long employed professional writers and editors to help with their memoirs, the profession of personal historians helping “ordinary” people tell their stories is still emerging. APH, founded by Kitty Axelson-Berry in 1995, has led in developing the profession.

APH members bring expertise from careers such as journalism, education, broadcasting, video, film, psychology, law, social work, gerontology, therapy, hospice, medicine, and more. Asked about their professional backgrounds in an APH member survey, 76 percent of respondents reported experience in writing, 30 percent in history, 21 percent from

psychology or social work, 21 percent came from broadcasting, 31 percent from publishing, and 70 percent had prior experience doing interviews.

Personal history services are labor-intensive, involving hours of interviewing, transcribing, filming, editing, revising, and preparing materials for publication or broadcast. Prices vary widely, depending on the length and complexity of the process. Costs range from several hundred dollars to \$40,000 or more, while fees for organizational histories are substantially higher. Though some projects can be completed in a matter of weeks, most require between six and twelve months, and some can take up to two years.

Often, a personal history is commissioned as a gift — for a holiday, special birthday, anniversary or milestone event. Family members frequently share the cost, making the project an affordable investment for everyone, from which all benefit. Histories of companies and organizations are used for promotion, to boost employee morale, to explain the organization to donors and supporters, or to inform clients and vendors.

Copies of the works are often donated to local or university libraries and historical societies, where they are valued as special community resources. Occasionally these projects achieve commercial publication and success.

Many options available

APH members gather memories and life stories by recording people telling their stories, by teaching others how to capture their own or others' histories, or by participating in community efforts. The works are preserved in a variety of formats, including books, CDs, DVDs, and websites.

Many APH members have specialized training or skills required for sensitive projects — such as those involving hospice patients, breast cancer survivors, Holocaust survivors, or veterans. APH is a premiere partner of the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project.

Contact information for APH members qualified to address specialized areas of personal history preservation is provided below.

Benefits of reminiscence

Time after time, APH members witness how therapeutic both reminiscence and life review can be for those whose stories are being told. Sons and daughters concerned about their aging parents' reliving the past find comfort in learning that, far from being the rambling of lonely old souls or a sign of incipient dementia, life review is a natural stage important to an elder's well-being. In re-examining key moments in the past, those telling their life stories gain a new appreciation of their experience and its outcomes.

Several studies show that writing about life experiences strengthens the immune system. The first was reported by University of Texas professor James Pennebaker, whose 1997 book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* is widely used by teachers and psychologists. The April 1999 issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, reported immune system benefits in asthma and rheumatoid arthritis patients who participated in a study that replicated Pennebaker's work. Other professional journals have covered the topic since, and a wealth of information published in professional literature suggests the life review process helps overcome depression, increases problem-solving skills, enhances self-esteem, eases transition for end-of-life patients, and can help those grieving a loss.

Personal History attracts increased attention

Personal history has begun to enjoy a higher profile, with major stories on APH members appearing in recent years. Coverage typically highlights the pleasures and benefits of telling one's story.

The partial list of publications that have reported on APH members includes the *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Denver Post*, the *Hartford Courant*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The (London) Telegraph*, the *Montreal Star*, the *National Post*, the *Toronto Star*, and *The Vancouver Sun*. Articles have also appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *AARP: The Magazine*, *Real Simple*, *Forbes*, *Worth*, and *Money* magazines, among others.

Televised stories have appeared on “NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw” and “The Jane Pauley Show,” on CNN, CNBC, and MSNBC. APH members have been interviewed extensively on radio, including National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcast System.

Where to learn more

The APH website provides a wealth of information and resources about personal history, as well as advice on how to capture one’s own or a relative’s life story. Visitors to the site can locate personal historians by geographic locale and areas of expertise.

For more information on the Association of Professional Historians or services provided by its members, visit www.personalhistorians.org or contact Paula Stahel, APH president, at 813-251-8187 or president@personalhistorians.org.

Additional contacts

The following are but a few APH members qualified to discuss specialized projects and able to provide additional contacts and resources for stories.

- Veterans History Project: APH’s Premiere Partnership liaison is Bob Breakstone, Our Living Tree LLC, bob@ourlivingtree.com or 212-662-8997 (N.-Y.).
- Holocaust Survivors: Anita Hecht, Life History Services, anita@lifehistoryservices.com or 608-255-9669 (Wisc.); Sara Ghitis, SGhitis@aol.com or 404-816-4109 (Ga.).
- WWII Home Front Histories: Marilyn Geary, marilyngeary@comcast.net or 415-488-1211 (Calif.); Julie McDonald Zander, memorybooks@chaptersoflife.com or 360-864-6938 (Wash.).
- Community Projects: Darlene Roth, Darlene@darleneroth.com or 805-473-1656 (Calif.); Audrey Tomaselli, tmsli@sonic.net or 415-391-1792 (Calif.); Kate Cavett, handinhand@oralhistorian.org or 651-227-5987 (Minn.); Shizue Seigel, shiz1@mindspring.com or 415-221-0487 (Calif.).
- Cultural Projects:

- Performance Art and Storytelling: Jewish & Palestinian Interfaith: Audrey Galex, Audrey@RootsWings.com, 404-486-7377 (Ga.); African-American History: Ersula Odom, sulattoo@tampabay.rr.com, 888-564-7852 (Fla.).
- First Nations or Native American: Vera Rosenbluth, vera@linksandlegacies.com, 604-734-6646 (B.C., Canada); Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, MaryOBTyrr@aol.com, 651-698-1158 (Minn.).
- Appalachian Narratives: Rae Jean Sielen, rsielen@populore.com, 304-599-3880 (W. -Va.).
- Spanish-Mexican Ancestry in N. America: Gloria L. Cordova, Ph.D., cordovag@losalmos.com, 505-672-3721 (N. -Mex.).
- Immigration Narratives: Margaret L. Dorazio-Migliore, mdorazio@interchange.ubc.ca, 604-530-3959 (B.C., Canada).
- Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgender Narratives: Peg Thompson, Ph.D., Peg.Thompson@yourstorycounts.com, 303-798-4314 (Colo.); Cathy Cade, cathy@CathyCade.com, 510-251-2774 (Calif.)
- Cancer & Critical Illness Narratives: Linda Blachman, Linda@lindablachman.com, 510-466-5053 (Calif.); Christine Harland Chamberlain, info@camdenwriters.com, 207-729-0911 (Me.).
- Hospice & End-of-Life Narratives: Judy Wright, Judy@ArtichokePress.com, 406-549-9813 (Mont.); Doris Morrison, ARMS3601@aol.com, 405-348-4906 (Okla.).
- Ethical Wills & Legacy Letters: Barry K. Baines, M.D., thelegacycenter@yahoo.com, 612-518-2642 (Minn.), Libby Atwater, historian@chooseyourwords.net, 805-642-1363 (Calif.).