

## **Writing an autobiography is a great way to share your family history**

By Gary L. Calligas

My wife and I had a great opportunity to travel to Europe a couple of weeks ago. I met many riverboat cruise passengers who were telling me that they decided to write their autobiography to pass along family history to their kids, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. One lady commented to me that in years past, the family bible was used by her family members to record the family tree but lacked giving details of their family members. She remarked it would have been better to know how their great grandparents came to America in the early 1800s, than just their names, birthdates, marriage date, and death dates.

Most of my family did not write down their family histories, like many others, so it has been very difficult for me to find out their family history. I have learned some very interesting facts about my relatives just by using Google and ancestry searches, but also talking with other relatives. But these facts are merely bits and pieces of, what I can only imagine, was a fascinating life story of each of them. It would have been wonderful to have had the opportunity to ask questions and record all the details of all of my relatives.

We have all attended gatherings where family members have reminisced about “the old country” or the “good old days” here in the U.S., but how many of us have taken the time to record these stories? Today’s readily available technology makes it easy for loved ones to share their stories via video or audio recorders to help them in making an autobiography.

I have a friend that interviewed and recorded her grandparents as they recalled memory after memory of their childhoods and married life together. She then transcribed the conversations, and preserved them in a self-published book that she illustrated with old pictures. That year she gave copies of the book to everyone in the family as a Christmas gift. I’m certain that these books will become a treasured family memento for future generations to cherish. For those who are technologically challenged or who need a way to get their loved one to open up about their past, there are a number of fantastic, journal-style books full of thought-provoking questions and space for recording answers.

My own father was born in Romania and had traveled the world as a merchant marine before settling in Tyler, Texas in 1939. Fortunately I asked my father to share his story many years before he died in 1987 which I have preserved for my children and grandchildren. My mother loved to share stories of her childhood. I cherish the time I spent with her as she recalled one amusing incident after another for me to video record that I will be able to pass along to my kids and grandchildren.

I recently made a presentation at a local retirement community where I encouraged the attendees to write or record their memories, but also consider writing their autobiography. Many seniors eagerly came up to relate a fascinating story about their past, but in almost every instance the person had not yet recorded these stories for their family members.

Another great source for making your family history journal is by utilizing the many old photographs, videos, and audio recordings. Just by showing a family member an old photograph can help them recall the story behind the photo. I recently went through some of my own family’s photographs and luckily my mother had written details on the back of many the photos to help me relate to the persons in these photos as well as the occasion.

Family bonds may not be as strong as they once were due to our mobile society. Knowing where we come from and our family's history strengthens those bonds by imparting a powerful sense of who we are. I challenge each of you to start now to collect those family stories and to encourage your family members to write their own autobiographies. Yes, I have also decided to begin my own autobiography so that my kids and grandkids can have that information in the near future. I will definitely use the many photos containing in our photo albums to help recall those stories of the past. Preserving family history is a wonderful gift for those we love and for those who will follow.

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