

A New Year's Resolution: Giving the Past a Future

Andrea Gross

Tampa Bay Metro Magazine, December, 2005

“A talk on writing your life story,” said the notice in the newspaper. Neva Ennis was delighted. She’d had a long life and had a lot of stories she wanted to tell.

She was born in 1907 and grew up surrounded by the smell of ripe oranges—not from a glass on the table but from the trees outside. She and her mother lived on her grandparents’ orange grove near Plant City while her father worked in Tampa. It was only 25 miles away—but 25 miles then was like 200 miles now. So her father stayed at his sister’s home in Tampa during the week and only saw his wife and daughter on the weekends. During the summer she played out at Indian Rocks Beach and, one time when she was a teen, she’d met a young man studying for the ministry. His name was Billy Graham.

Her life wasn’t the stuff of movies; she knew that. But it was her life, and she was proud of it. She wanted her children and grandchildren—and their grandchildren—to know the girl she’d been and the woman she’d become.

Ennis went to the presentation at a Tampa chapter of the Colonial Dames and listened intently as personal historian Paula Stahel reaffirmed her beliefs. “Wouldn’t you like to read about your great-great-grandmother?” asked Stahel. “In the same way, your great great-grandchildren will like to read about you.”

The two women worked together for nearly a year. Stahel conducted 10 hours of interviews, shaped Ennis’s words into narrative form, integrated photos and documents, and shepherded the project through production and printing. The result was a 185-page book titled

Sandy Ruts, Tall Pines and Orange Groves, which Ennis, then 93, distributed to family members at an informal book signing party.

“Mrs. Ennis was thrilled because so many friends and family members came to honor her,” says Stahel. “We’d printed 40 copies of the book, and by day’s end every one of them was gone! We had to print more and then more again. We ended up printing 200 copies.”

The Ennis’s are lucky that the family matriarch recognized the value of preserving her memories. Often it is the adult children who instigate the process of getting a family history. They realize that if they don’t get it now, someday it’ll be too late. And without those stories, they’ll never know all the things that make their families—and themselves—unique.

In fact, a 2005 study by Harris Interactive says that boomers, by a factor of 10 - 1, consider their real legacy to be the “non-financial leave-behinds”—the personal stories that reveal not only the family history, but also the family ethics, morality and values.

This desire on the part of people to preserve their past has spawned a new profession, that of personal historian. Once only the rich and famous hired ghostwriters to help them write a memoir. But today, with families too far apart and individuals too busy for rocking-chair conversations, ghostwriting has gone mainstream.

In 1994, after 10 years interviewing people for investigative newspaper stories, Massachusetts journalist Kitty Axelson-Berry decided to interview her own mother, to investigate her own past. “Older people feel the need to conduct life review, to figure out their

lives, and younger adults feel the need for roots,” says Axelson-Berry, whose Amherst-based company, Modern Memoirs, Inc., produces approximately 15 books a year.

While stories can be preserved digitally or in print, books remain the most frequently used method. Quite simply, if books are printed and bound properly, they’ll last forever, while there’s always a danger that changing technology will make today’s CDs and DVDs obsolete. Books also allow the storyteller to go into greater depth and explore personal thoughts without risking a surfeit of onscreen emotion. On the other hand, video biographies capture body language and facial expression and bond people at family gatherings.

While some family histories are based on historical and genealogical research or old family documents, the great majority include the personal recollections of family elders. Like Mrs. Ennis, most people are better story-tellers than story-writers, and they prefer to tell their story to an engaged questioner.

Professional interviewers come with a built-in advantage over a family member who, however well-intentioned or even well-trained, will have a difficult time collecting the detailed stories that are the foundation of a good memoir. People speak in familial shorthand when talking to relatives; they omit details because they correctly assume a degree of previous knowledge and understanding. But those details are exactly what future readers will need to fully understand the story.

In addition, people are often more comfortable talking to an outsider because they know that secrets inadvertently revealed will remain just that—secrets. All professionals guarantee confidentiality and make sure that the storyteller is the first to see and edit the manuscript, regardless of who has commissioned the memoir.

Assuming the end product is a book, the interviews will be recorded on tape, transcribed to paper, edited and, to various degrees depending on the wishes of the client, organized to make a compelling story. Once again, an outsider has an advantage. Because he or she comes to the project without preconceived ideas or prior information, he’s able to see the themes that run throughout the storyteller’s life and, if requested, weave them through the manuscript.

At this point the book moves into the production phase. The text is proof read, photographs chosen, format selected, pages printed and bound. Results range from simple stapled booklets to multi-volume sets crafted in heirloom leather.

This all takes time, lots of time, and hiring a professional can be expensive. Depending on the complexity of the project and the experience and expertise of the biographer, a memoir can run from several hundred dollars to more than \$50,000. Most personal historians also hold workshops for confirmed do-it-yourselfers or will coach individuals on a private basis.

Is it worth it? Ask a 75-year-old woman from Kansas City who said, “You can’t imagine what it’s like for someone like me, an ordinary person, to see my face on the cover of a book. It’s awesome!” Ask a 60-year-old man who read the words of his mother. “Now I understand her—and me—so much better,” he said.

Or ask a 9-year-old boy who finished reading the story of his great-grandfather’s immigration to the United States. “I’m proud,” he said. “That’s all. I’m proud to be me.”