

Learning about yourself by looking into the past

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Everyone has a story to tell, according to the age-old adage, and telling these stories is being encouraged this month to celebrate Personal History Awareness Month.

A good personal history won't just include facts; it will also include stories, according to Pat McNees, a professional personal historian.

"The first thing to do is start a timeline ... make it include a combination of incidents in your life and turning points," McNees said. You want to get the significant periods like high school. When you met your husband, got married, or had children."

Instead of just writing these things down, McNees suggested either video or audio recording the person telling the stories so their voice is preserved.

"The voice is an essential part of the person. When you hear someone's voice it immediately brings back a flood of memories," she said.

Photos can also be a part of someone's personal history. McNees suggested going through your photographs and writing things down while you can still remember them, such as who is in the picture and a description of what was happening when it was taken, when and where.

"A lot of things you're going to want to be remembered and you're not going to remember them later even if you think you will," McNees said.

For picture preservation, it's better to write down the information on something besides the photo, according to McNees.

Beyond yourself

Richard Smith, a chemistry professor at McDaniel College, has been researching his own family history for the past 25 or 30 years, he said.

"Putting together your family tree is like eating peanuts. Once you get hooked, once you get started, it is very, very hard to stop," Smith said. "You come up with an interesting question, and in answering that question you come up with a half a dozen others."

He's also been researching the history of the African American community at Chincoteague Island, and teaches a one-week workshop on genealogy during Common Ground on the Hill every year. It's something anyone can do with enough research, he said.

“You basically start with whatever family records that are in existence, like a family Bible, birth certificates, death certificates or marriage licenses,” Smith said.

After exhausting those resources, public records are the next research step. Smith said that if you can map out your family tree to the year 1930 then census records would become helpful.

“Census records are kept private for 70 years and it typically takes another two to five years or so once the census data is released to be indexed and searchable,” Smith said. “So 1930 is the most recent data available right now.”

It’s easier to trace male relatives through public record than females because women usually change their surname when they get married, he said. However, marriage licenses and death certificates are usually good resources for that, he said.

African Americans can also be hard to trace in history, Smith said, because the vast majority of slaves in the United States didn’t have last names.

Popularity surge

The popularity of looking at personal history or genealogy is on the rise, McNees said, partly because a huge bulk of the population is older now.

“There is a stage of life of which remembering is one of the things you have a natural tendency to do,” McNees said. “I’ve done interviews with people in their 80s and 90s and it’s incredible how therapeutic it is.”

Many people like to have a recording of themselves and their memories for family members to look back at as evidence of which they were when they’re no longer that person, according to McNees. As people get older their memory can falter through old age or diseases such as Alzheimer’s disease.

As children become adults, they tend to get tired of listening to their parents tell the same story 13 times, she said. Instead of getting annoyed, McNees suggested trying to take a different approach.

“Think of it as ‘I may never hear this story again.’ Sort of honor the person by listening to the story and you’ll see something really wonderful happen to that person. It’s like they transform,” McNees said.

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