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The Business of Personal Histories

by Pat McNees

Memoirs are no longer the province of the rich and celebrated. Non-celebrities are getting into the act, they often need help, and writing or editing their personal histories can be a deeply satisfying new source of potential income for journalists.

I stumbled across life story writing in 1990, when Kitty Kelley recommended that Jim Dicke II, president of a lift truck firm in Ohio, use ASJA's Dial-a-Writer service to find someone to help tell his 90-year-old grandfather's story. At the time I supported my journalism habit by editing reports and writing summaries for the World Bank. Soon after a friend from Texas said I had "too much steak and not enough sizzle," Dorothy Beach, who ran DAW, sent several of us to

Ohio for an interview. I landed the gig and upped my sizzle factor.

Projects like these are often part therapy, so I took a few years to write *An American Biography*, the life and times of Warren Webster, an unknown industrialist. With a guaranteed sale of 5,000 copies, a DC publisher issued the biography in 2004, printing 10,000 copies altogether. Many, if not most, copies were given away (most recently to a book group comprised of seniors in New York).

Social and business history wrapped around a Horatio Alger story (and with a foreword by ASJA member Rob Kanigel), the book paid me well enough to take out a mortgage on a three-bedroom condo, which I paid off last year.

More important, and I can't overstate this, I had a sample. This got me many more projects, including the memoirs of a pediatrician (a friend's father) and a nuclear engineer (a friend's husband), and several histories of organizations (similar genre, but more complex).

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ▶



Pat McNees is co-editor (with Paula Stallings Yost) of an anthology to be published late this year, *My Words Are Gonna Linger: The Art of Personal History*, to be published by Personal History Press. Her current project is a history of the department of psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. www.patmcnees.com

Once I started doing personal histories, my income soared and became steadier.

A wide-open field

There are many ways to do personal histories. There's the plain old oral history, edited for narrative flow, often with photos. This involves interviews, transcribing (which I farm out), editing, and packaging (such as a fancy cloth binding with a photo insert on the cover to make it special). It's the least time-consuming of the print products.

Then there's the as-told-to-memoir, in Uncle Vern's own voice, ghostwritten by you, based on interviews, journals, letters, the memoirist's own drafts—whatever it takes.

There's the biography or history, written in third person, about the person, couple, family, or organization. I tend to interview everyone in the family or, for an organizational history, a range of participants, from the janitor to the CEO.

Technologies have changed, making it easier to “self-publish” a printed book or mount a story on a Web site. On one end of the personal history spectrum are scrapbooking and quilting; on the other, many organizations and communities are commissioning personal and group oral histories (both recorded and in edited transcripts) or professionally written histories (my specialty).

I also love the video tribute or history—a Ken Burns-like narration illustrated with photos and sounds, including recordings of people telling stories, sometimes captured in video, often as a montage of stills with narration and reminiscence in one or more voices. (Music is tricky because of copyright issues, but there are sources for commissioned, inexpensive or royalty-free music. And music makes a difference.)

Finding the market

Creating a personal history may be easier than finding clients willing to spend the amount you want to be paid. Many beginners spin their wheels marketing to senior citizens and old people's homes. I suspect residents of most senior homes are pinching pennies and don't think their stories are worth telling—at least not in a form that costs money. Market instead to their children, grandchildren, spouses or well-to-do fans who have heard the stories so many times that they don't necessarily want to sit through them again, but want them preserved—or want the subject engaged in a project. (The “client” is often not the narrator, or storyteller, in other words.)

Even a modest personal or family story can seem a huge, undoable task to most people, yet fairly easy to a writer-editor. What pleases my clients is that I come in from outside, establish rapport and get a different (fuller, often franker) story than the family might get, though I get the story they know, too. What I do—what you can probably do, too—is help people find the patterns in their lives, the obstacles overcome, the lessons learned. This plus storytelling can make

writing a personal history a transformative experience, helping people see that their life has meaning.

How to get started

For a sample, do the life story of someone in your family, and package it handsomely enough that simply seeing it shows potential clients the possibilities for their own family or company. Start with something as simple as a photo tribute (with well-written captions) to a person, a place, an animal, a period in your life, or a period in someone else's or an organization's history.

My brother and I, for example, are doing a photohistory of our family's migration from Kansas to hot Western deserts during the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Aunts, uncles and cousins have turned out their photo collections and this is one story even my non-reading cousins are going to love.

And that's the point. To the people for whom these personal histories are created, the story is fascinating, because it memorializes their roots. And for a major occasion—a 70th birthday, a 50th anniversary, retirement or any hint that a person you love is not going to live forever—some people will part with a fair sum if they think you can collect and organize all the information, stories and photos they don't have time to deal with and create a product as important as family legacy. If nothing else, this is a good way to share and thereby preserve those important family photos that might otherwise be lost to a house fire or other disaster.

Showing the right package to a receptive person—just showing what a personal history might look like—can land a client, sometimes instantly, sometimes months or years later.

For the more lucrative and difficult task of landing an organizational history, again, a sample is your best calling card. I watched a businesswoman decide to commission a project based totally on looking through a photo history a personal historian casually handed her.

How do I become a personal historian?

In a sense a “personal historian” is anyone who helps others record the stories of their lives, families or organizations. Few of the personal historians I've met were freelance writers making a living as writers. Those who belong to the Association of Personal Historians (APH, of which I am vice president) typically had earlier careers as teachers, counselors, hospice workers, social workers, journalists, oral historians, historians, news broadcasters, gerontologists, businessmen or women, videographers, photographers, transcribers, archivists or nurses.

Journalists and book authors have a leg up in terms of skills, knowledge of publishing and natural nosiness, but my favorite personal history (PH) firm (My Special Book) was launched during a building slump by two architects in Buenos Aires, who see PH work as a design and management process. Check out their website (www.myspecialbook.com) and those of other personal history firms (www.personalhistorians.org).

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Total membership: 1,337 members

Personal Histories continued from page C2

APH embraces print, audio and video biographers at varying levels of skill and experience. Many members are 50 and older. (It helps to have been around a while—or to have read widely enough to know what questions to ask when a woman says her family immigrated from Lithuania in 1945.) I joined APH out of curiosity and to get my name listed on their Web site, but value their fall conference, where I can see the kinds of work I don't do myself. I have helped with two video tributes for print clients—and it helps to know what's involved and who's good at putting them together. It's also interesting to learn what people charge: from a few hundred dollars (many projects are \$10,000 and under) to \$30,000, generally, and much more for longer stories or more complex projects, including organizational

histories. (That doesn't include production costs.)

The most popular event at the APH conference is the Media Share, where people show their audio-visual products. My favorite was a tribute to a dog, with narration clipped from interviews with the dog's elderly owner. Video captured the affection, joy and nostalgia on the man's face and in his voice, which, combined with shots of the man and his dog over the years, made for a three-hankie experience. (Now viewable online at: www.ourliving-tree.com/memorialvideos/gusfreud.html.)

Such projects are a priceless form of personal history. If your friends are as nuts about their animals as my friends are, I think you could make a living just doing animal tributes. [asja](http://asja.org)

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