



WRITING THE SOUL

## Family History Made Easy

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*“I honestly believe that a great novel could be written about each and every one of us. We all have wondrous tales written across our faces. Some are epic, some tragic, some hilarious, some elegiac, and, of course, some are spare—but none would be uninteresting.”*

— Jack Spencer, *Reader’s Digest*

There are two books nestled between my novels and textbooks. They are not books of famous people, or people who led exotic lives. They are family history books, and the starring protagonists are my grandparents, and those who came before them.

When I open my grandfather's book and read, his personality tumbles off the page. I relive stories that were forgotten across the generations, as memories faded. His thoughts and emotions, hopes and dreams, regrets and loves, come alive for me.

My children read my grandparents' books and feel a deep connection, a sense of oneness with those who preceded them. It makes us feel rooted, secure, linked to those who came before and those who will come after.

You too can tell your story, or the stories of beloved relatives.

And when your children and grandchildren pass the stories along to their children, you'll see the power of the gift that keeps on giving.

## How to Get Started

Once you make the decision to write your stories and history, where do you start?

Below are tips to get started on your family history process so that your treasures are collected and safe when you want to include them in your family history. The next step is using your family treasures to spark old memories.

### *Step One*

Slowly gather your treasures in one place—what I call the “Family Treasures Space.” This doesn't have to be an onerous, time-consuming process. Post the following list on your refrigerator or somewhere accessible. When you have some spare time—10 minutes here, half an hour there—gather your resources so that when you're ready to really start working on your family history, you'll have all the pieces you need.

#### Photographs

Where are they? Are they in albums or shoeboxes? Does anyone else in your family have a collection that you don't have? Remember, in the generations before digital photography, family collections were divided among the siblings. Go through your house and get all the pictures in one place.

#### Newspaper Articles

Look for birth, death, wedding, graduation, and other announcements.

#### Letters, Telegrams, V-Mail (WWII), and Postcards

My client's grandmother saved all the letters her father wrote home from Europe in WWII. They provide a wonderful glimpse into his 20-year-old-self under intense circumstances.

#### Diaries and Journals

Was anyone in your family a scribbler? Look for their writings. For the moment, don't sit down and read everything. Just get them into your Family Treasures Space.

### Childhood Keepsakes

Did anyone's mom keep crayon pictures and early writings? Favorite dolls and toys? Holiday costumes? Report cards, school workbooks, projects? Sort through and keep the best. Or take digital pictures and file them for future use.

### History Fragments

My grandmother wrote a two-page life history for a memoir writing class she took. How I wish there was more! But what she wrote is fascinating, and it became the basis of a book I wrote about her after her death.

Another client had a "legend" in the family about an ancestor in the 1600s who founded a colony in New England. Jot down those family legends so that when you have time, you or a historian can verify it.

### Family Trees/Genealogy

Ask around to see who may have an old family tree in their possession.

### Heirlooms

Take a piece of paper and/or your digital camera and walk around your house looking for heirlooms with stories. The dime-store ring your great-grandfather gave your great-grandmother until they could afford a real ring says a lot about true love and the struggles of early marriage. How about the tea cups your mother collected, or your great-aunt's rocking chair? What about the necklace of your great-great-grandmother? Take pictures and jot down the stories.

And that's enough to start! Just post this list and start pulling your family resources together in one place.

Once you've completed Step One, you are ready for the next step—using your resources and your senses to trigger memories.

## *Step Two*

### Powerful Ways to Recall Forgotten Memories

Returning to the home of your youth, your old school, or vacation haunts can be a powerful tool for evoking memories. Sensory input can also trigger forgotten memories, as this passage from *One Native Life* by Richard Wagamese vividly describes:

The more I presented myself to the land in those early hours, the more it offered me back the realization of who I was created to be.

I began to remember. The sound of squirrels in the topmost branches of a pine tree reminded me of a forgotten episode from my boyhood; the wobbly call of the loons took me back to an adventure on the land when I was a young man. And there was always the light. The shades and degrees of it evoked people and places I hadn't thought about in decades. Every one of those walks allowed me the grace of recollection, and I began to write things down.

For me, the sound of bleating baby sheep and squawking chickens, the tangy smell of the woods after rain, the touch of salamanders and scratchy hay beneath my head, and the bittersweet taste of wild apples evoke my strong childhood memories of summers spent on a farm.

Below are some powerful ways to tap into the rich treasure of memories that lie just below the surface of our awareness.

### Smell

One of the strongest memory triggers for me is the smell of baking bread. My father often baked bread, and today all I need is a whiff of freshly baked bread to take me back to my childhood memories.

### Photographs

Look through the old photos you collected, and within minutes you'll begin to remember the stories behind the images. Take a pen, or keyboard, and start writing the memories that come to mind

### Music

We all have a sound or two that can trigger vivid memories. What's your song?

### A Favorite Object

Everyone has a favorite object. And every object has a story to be told. Do you have a favorite object?

### A Favorite Childhood Place

This can be a place that was indoors or outdoors, rural or urban, fanciful or spiritual. What's the story behind your favorite place?

When you're ready to take the next step in writing your family history, I'm here to help!

Call for a FREE consultation and start preserving your family history today.

*“Some people think we're made of flesh and blood and bones. Scientists say we're made of atoms. But I think we're made of stories. When we die, that's what people remember, the stories of our lives and the stories that we told.”*

— Ruth Stotter, American storyteller