

Belnap Family Organization

2006 Reunion

Rexburg, Idaho

“How to Write Your Personal History”

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Omni 1:8-9

“And it came to pass that I [Amaron] did deliver the plates unto my brother Chemish. Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end.”

Omni 1:17-18

“And at the time that Mosiah discovered [the people of Zarahemla or Mulekites], they had become exceedingly numerous. Nevertheless, they had had many wars and serious contentions, and had fallen by the sword from time to time; and their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them. But it came to pass that Mosiah caused that they should be taught in his language. And it came to pass that after they were taught in the language of Mosiah, Zarahemla gave a genealogy of his fathers, according to his memory; and they are written, but not in these plates.”

Georgie Anne Geyer

“If you don’t know history . . . you are a prisoner of your time and place; you don’t know what came before, so you can never know what will come next. You’ve lost the knowledge of the origins of things. You’re frozen in ‘me’ and most often in ‘now,’ when it should be ‘we’ and ‘forever.’”

(Syndicated Columnist, Westminster College Commencement Address, 1996.)

President Spencer W. Kimball

“I urge all of the people of this Church to give serious attention to their family histories, to encourage their parents and grandparents to write their journals, and let no family go into eternity without having left their memoirs for their children, their grandchildren, and their posterity. This is a duty and a responsibility, and I urge every person to start the children out writing a personal history and journal.”

(General Conference, April 1978.)

Moral Obligation/Duty

“Your life thus far has cost nature, your family, and many other people a tremendous price in resources, time, effort, and actual dollars expended just to make you become a healthy, capable human being. Is it really asking too much to expect you to leave some accounting of your life, some record of your role in your family, towns, and society? That you give a little credit to those who helped shape you? That you pass along insights and lessons you have learned to the next generation?”

Written Personal History

- Standard method for preserving one's history
 - ◆ Printed book, typescript/word processing print-out, handwritten manuscript
- Permits later revisions/additions
- May be easily reproduced or digitized
- Safest with current technology
- Should be written/preserved on acid-free paper
- May be difficult to incorporate recent technologies

“Illustrated” Personal History

- Creative; highly individualistic
- May be in the form of a scrap book or include heirlooms or other tangible materials
 - ◆ Photos, souvenirs, programs, ticket stubs, personal possessions
- May be simplistic or impressionistic
- May lack focus or explanation
- May be difficult to preserve or keep materials together in original format long-term

Electronic Media Personal History

- Creative—may be a movie, slide show, etc.
- Captures inflection, intonation, movement
- May be used to avoid the formalities of written English or a structured layout
- Least archivally stable (particularly analog formats—e.g., cassette/VHS tapes)
- Often requires extra time, energy, expense

Personal History Formats/Styles

A personal history often originates from a compilation of discrete events, experiences, or stories. How you choose to organize and integrate these episodes will largely determine the format of your life story. Determining beforehand what format your story will take will greatly simplify the process of gathering information and putting it all together.

“Chronological” Life Story

- Basic outline might include:
 - ◆ Family background and heritage
 - ◆ Childhood, middle, later years
 - ◆ Epilogue, significant life lessons, miscellaneous
- Advantages:
 - ◆ Historically most literal—shows one’s life as it unfolded
- Disadvantages:
 - ◆ May fail to relate distantly occurring events or themes
 - ◆ If too literal, may also be too dry

“Geographical” Life Story

- May be useful for those who moved frequently or are unsure when events occurred but remember places
- Advantages:
 - ◆ Allows grouping events by place
- Disadvantages:
 - ◆ May fail to relate life trends that carry over from one location to the next

“Topical” Life Story

- Organized by subject matter, regardless of time (“chronological”) or space (“geographical”); topics might include:
 - ◆ Occupations, schooling, religious experiences, humorous events, health, etc.
- Advantages:
 - ◆ Allows grouping like events together
- Disadvantages:
 - ◆ May fail to show how simultaneously occurring events interrelate
 - ◆ May prevent reader from seeing the whole you

“Mixed” Life Story

- May be a combination of chronological, geographical, and/or topical, although most often chronological with other formats mixed in
- Advantages:
 - ◆ Permits you to show how your life has unfolded with interesting stories interspersed
- Disadvantages:
 - ◆ If not generally chronological or geographical, then contemporaneous experiences may not be correlated; if not somewhat topical, then similar stories are also separated

Moral of “Your” Story

- Like your life, no approach or format will be perfect; choose which format will work best for YOU
- Glean ideas from well-written biographies
- How you organize your life story will say as much about you as what you choose to write, record, or preserve

Organizing Your Personal History

- Sort/organize personal school, work, family, and church papers
- Review old journals and diaries, daytimers, planning calendars, directories
- Watch favorite movies; listen to favorite music
- Read/view historical materials about your growing-up years
- Visit old neighborhoods, childhood homes, former schools
- Contact old friends and reminisce about the “good ol’ days”

Organizing continued . . .

- Visit with relatives; record what is said
- Dust off old letters, postcards, scrapbooks, certificates, programs, yearbooks, report cards, newspaper articles
- Read already-written autobiographies and life sketches of your parents, siblings, or children—the stories told by others close to you can spark your own memories

Organizing continued . . .

- Organize and view photos, slides, and home movies and constantly ask:
 - ◆ What was the event?
 - ◆ Why was it important enough to record?
 - ◆ Where was it?
 - ◆ Who else was there?
 - ◆ What other clues are visible in the picture?
 - ◆ What isn't shown that I can still remember?
- Ask to view the photos, etc., in the possession of other family members and friends

Writing Your Personal History

Once the organizing is well underway, you may begin putting your life story together:

- Sort your files, note cards, boxes and arrange in the order or format you've chosen
- Create an outline or timeline
- Review and compare successful versions of personal histories
- Begin writing or compiling one section, era, or subject at a time (e.g., "Teenage Years" or "My Most Spiritual Experiences")

Some Stylistic Pointers

- Use “active” voice as much as possible (example: “I saw the boat” and not “The boat was seen by me”)
- Include precise factual details: dates, times, locations, others who were present, etc.
- Include feelings and impressions (key: using any of the 5 senses—touch, hearing, taste, smell, sight—will enliven your story)
- Refer to events in the larger world and how they affected you; situate your life in the context of contemporary social, cultural, economic, and political forces

More Stylistic Pointers . . .

- Write to a particular audience, e.g., your posterity, yourself, an imagined third person
- Be completely truthful; don't exaggerate the good times or deny the bad times, but do emphasize the positive lessons learned through life's struggles and hardships
- Add your personal beliefs, philosophy of life, counsel, opinions, advice
- Rewrite and revise—often; events may take on a different perspective with the passage of time; revisions allow further insight and wisdom

Compiling Your Family History

Family history—whether the focus is one individual, one nuclear family, or one surname over several generations—is the product of stories about the lives of individuals like yourself. The key is to start small with personal histories, including your own. Begin where you have the most information—with yourself—and work back. Encourage those still living to write down their own personal histories or memories.

Compiling continued . . .

Gather information by:

- Conducting interviews
- Calling or writing for information
- Visiting relatives while at home or on vacation
- Contacting cousins to locate surviving personal papers, photographs, mementos, etc.

Remember this . . .

Anything written by you about yourself or about an ancestor who otherwise failed to record his or her life story, even if just a page or a paragraph, is better than nothing. Once you're gone, whatever memories you carry within you may be lost forever.

and this . . .

A personal history—your personal history—is a record of love. It shows those who come after that you cared enough about them, even though you will never know most of them, to record something about yourself and your time on earth to reach out to them in the hope that, whatever the future may bring, you love them because you share something with them. Rather than being a self-centered exercise, recording your personal history can be one of the most selfless gifts you could ever leave for your posterity.

Doctrine and Covenants 128:24

“Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation.”