



Do You Need a Personal Historian? Professionals Have Skills That Grandparents May Lack

By [Susan Adcox](#)
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During the initial conversation, you'll also get an idea of the cost of the project you envision. Of course, the price tag can change as your vision evolves. Still, many services are surprisingly affordable.

It's nice to know that no one's story need go untold.

Finding exactly the right personal historian to work with is important.
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Perhaps it's because grandparents are more aware of their own mortality than young people. Perhaps it's because having grandchildren gives us a different, broader sense of family. Whatever the reasons, many grandparents find themselves wanting to tell their own stories. And that urge sometimes brings them to a personal historian.

Who Needs a Personal Historian?

My mother died in 2002, my dad in 2008.

My mom lives on in my heart, in the memory of friends and family members, and in a few faded photographs and handwritten recipes. My father was a newspaperman and writer. He lives on in the two books of family history he penned. He also left behind a rich storehouse of letters, columns and photographs.

My father was his own personal historian. But because my mother wasn't a writer and was modest and self-effacing, her history is in danger of being lost altogether. A personal historian could have helped her preserve her story, which is also worthy of being told.

Writing and working with documents doesn't come naturally to everyone. And some people are simply overwhelmed by the task. If you fall into one of these categories, you may be in the market for the services of a personal historian.

What Is a Personal Historian?

One way to think of a personal historian is as a collaborator, a person who will work with you to tell your story the way you want it told.

A personal historian will interview you and others involved in your story and will either write your story for you or assist you in writing it.

Other than being skilled interviewers and writers, personal historians typically have other important skills. They know how to conduct research to fill in missing details.

They know how to work with photographs and documents to utilize and preserve them. And either they have graphic design skills or they have good contacts and can outsource design tasks to others.

Possible Products

Personal historians can produce products in audio, video or printed form. The most commonly produced product is a book, but increasingly books are being replaced by or supplemented with multimedia products.

Both books and multimedia products have drawbacks. Books, even if they are printed on archival paper, have a limited life. They can also be damaged by fire, water and insects. Multimedia products have their own set of problems, as formatting is constantly changing. The DVD that you can view today may become a worthless disk in the future.

Grandparents who want to be sure that their history is preserved as long as possible should opt for multiple forms. For example, if they choose audio tapes, they should arrange to have hard copy transcripts as well.

Grandparents who want to share their stories with their grandchildren and aren't as concerned about posterity can get by with simpler services.

Besides producing [memoirs and family histories](#), some personal historians offer products such as family trees, [ethical wills or legacy letters](#), digital scrapbooks and family websites.

If you have something different in mind, you can probably find a service to fit your needs.

Scope and Direction

Before beginning on your project, you'll need to think about how much of your history you want to include. If you have genealogical information at your disposal, you may want to include information about your roots. Some people choose to center on one particular period of their lives that they feel is the most important and interesting. These shorter histories may focus on a career, military service, involvement in a sport or a hobby or any particularly eventful period of a person's life.

You'll also need to decide on the primary purpose of your personal history. Do you want to preserve the facts? Or do you want to give your readers a sense of who you really are?

It's always nice to have a resource at hand with accurate facts.

If someone asks me where my father served during World War II, I can pick up his autobiography and give a definitive answer, right down to the tiniest island.

If you are creating your history for grandchildren, however, it's the smaller details that may be more important. [Personal historian Betsy Storm](#) recalls the first time that she heard that during the 1930s her grandparents threw lovely parties, complete with lots of bathtub gin. The grandparents that she had thought of as being so staid became more fully dimensional people.

"I suddenly envisioned them as real people," Storm said, "a young couple who'd once been somewhat carefree, bent a few rules and enjoyed their youth."

What Not to Tell

Indulging in a little bathtub gin didn't damage Storm's opinion of her grandparents, but most of us have a few episodes in our histories that we don't care to share. I deal with this issue in more detail in [How Much to Share About a Painful Past](#), but here's the gist of my advice. If the story is about overcoming adversity, don't hesitate to share it. [Research conducted at Emory University and reported by the New York Times](#) demonstrates that children who know family stories about overcoming challenges are themselves more resilient. On the other hand, shameful family secrets may be better kept secret.

Considering the nature of the topics that may be discussed, it's important to choose the right person to work with.

"A client needs to feel comfortable and at ease with the personal historian," said Alisha Morgan of [Paperclipped Memories](#). "They will likely explore difficult or sad topics together. It's vital that the client feels secure opening up and discussing those things."

Morgan added that confidentiality is "key" in personal history work.

"We only use material approved by clients," she said. "That goes a long way in developing a trusting relationship that allows clients to open up."

Getting Started

If a sense that one's time may be running out creates the impetus to record one's personal history, why do so few people complete the task?

It's also human nature to procrastinate, especially when you don't know exactly how to proceed.

It's not difficult to locate a personal historian. Many belong to the [Association of Personal Historians \(APH\), which has a search page](#). You can specify services desired or search by geographical location. (You'll get more results if you search by state or province rather than by zip code.) Those who belong to APH have signed a code of ethics that provides clients with some assurance of fair treatment.

Many clients prefer to work with someone in their own area, but some personal historians are willing to travel to work with you, and others will work via Skype or phone.

When It's Right

Most personal historians don't charge for an initial consultation. You should use that occasion to not only gather concrete information but also to see if the two of you are compatible.

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