

Cache if you can

Getting started on your own personal history project

By Kirk Woundy, Time Capsule Memoirs

If you're ready to document some of your history, congratulations. For most people, this kind of project never graduates from "Maybe someday" status.

The idea of committing even part of your life to print (or audio or video) can be daunting, and there's not necessarily a "right" way to jump in. There are, however, steps you can take to feel organized and energized almost immediately. Devote even 10 minutes a day, a couple of days per week, toward your project, and you'll soon enjoy real joys and benefits.

(The Association of Personal Historians has done a great job of describing some rewards inherent to the process, both intellectual and emotional, at <http://bit.ly/APHreasons>.)

So ... where to begin?

At Time Capsule Memoirs, we suggest taking a few minutes to write down aspects of life that you'd like to revisit. These can be events, places, people, turning points ... any influences that stand out as especially important or meaningful. Your initial list need not be perfect; you'll add, subtract and edit as time goes on. Just make sure you dedicate a single notebook or electronic document to this effort, to keep all of your notes in one easily accessible place.

From here, you might move to an endeavor most people really enjoy: collecting photos, letters, historical documents and other "raw materials." These represent the bones of some stories; in others, they're more complementary. Regardless, pulling them together helps give a story shape.

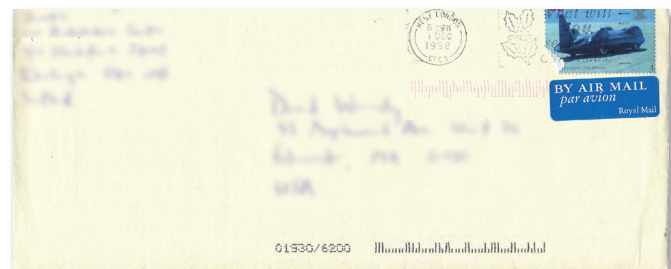
Here are a few types of materials to look for — and to let family members know you're looking for, so they can share theirs with you.



Photos. Maybe your prints and slides are scattered about in frames, albums and cardboard boxes. That's OK; just wander around and collect what you can find. When it comes to digital photos, compile your favorites onto the same machine,

ideally a computer with cloud-based backup or an external hard drive.

Diaries and journals. Writings from, say, great-grandparents can be rich sources of context and insight, if they're available. But your own diaries and journals, too, hold memories that are easily forgotten over time.



Letters and other correspondence. One-to-one communication often brims with emotion and detail. Plus, scanning short letters, telegrams, postcards or

World War II V-mail into your final book can prove visually and emotionally powerful.

Personal historical documents. Think of the documents that might go into a safety deposit box: immigration papers, marriage certificates, a veteran's DD 214 form. Besides supplying accurate dates, names, places and other details, these also make for appealing scanned images.



Newspaper articles and announcements.

Most libraries keep decades' worth of local newspaper records. The Pikes Peak Library District's collection, for instance, dates back to the 1870s, with news stories and obituaries, death registers and church registers, all searchable online.

Once you've hunted down specifics to your story, consider spending some time just browsing, which can provide valuable historical perspective.

Family trees and genealogy resources. If you don't have a family tree, maybe someone in your family does. There are also clubs and associations you can join, such as the Pikes Peak Genealogical Society, if you're interested in learning about how to document your ancestry.

Childhood mementos. Tattered stuffed animals, old vinyl LPs or sports trophies ... items that have been hidden away for years can, once unearthed, send memories flooding back. Take photos of them, or make scans of report cards or children's crayon drawings. All can make for compelling visuals.

Family heirlooms. Similarly, you might take pictures of physical objects that have acquired significance over time. From diamond necklaces to ceramic gravy boats, anything meaningful is grist for the mill.

Even if you don't wind up using all this material, you've done your family a great favor by "archiving" it in one place – especially if you scan in the hard-copy documents and photos. (An upcoming Time Capsule Memoirs document will delve into good techniques for print preparation. But the important thing, really, is to ensure they're digitized somehow.)

As you look at what you've collected, maybe you'll quickly see themes and narratives. Maybe you just see a big mound of "stuff." Either way, at this point we'd invite you to consider some overarching questions, such as:

- *Whom do I envision as my main "audience" for this project?*
- *What do I most want to impart to that audience?*
- *What should the scope of the project be, and how might it be presented?*

If you'd like to talk about these questions, or to brainstorm about making your vision into a reality, please keep Time Capsule Memoirs in mind. We'd love to help.



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