

START & RUN A PERSONAL HISTORY BUSINESS

Jennifer Campbell



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For Jamie and David

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— Jennifer Campbell

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1 THE WORLD OF PERSONAL HISTORY



1. What Is a Personal Historian? An Introduction

When I tell people I'm a personal historian, sometimes I hear, "A what?" or, "Like, you do genealogy?" After a quick explanation — "Well, genealogy and personal history are related fields," — I explain that I help people tell their life stories and publish them in heirloom books for their families and future generations. Within a minute, they're telling me about a relative who's led such an interesting life who really should do his memoirs. Or, sadly, about a relative who just passed away and used to tell great stories but no one got a chance to write them down, and now that branch of the family has lost its history. It seems everyone knows somebody who needs a personal historian.

What does a personal historian do? A personal historian steps into other people's lives for a brief, intense time, asking questions about their background, ancestors, events, and experiences that shaped their lives, relationships, foibles, struggles, accomplishments, regrets, highlights, and low lights — whatever memories, thoughts, feelings, and reflections they wish to talk about and have preserved. In a typical book project, a personal historian guides a person through the telling of his or her life's stories (or some aspect of his or her life) for a number of hours, records the interviews, transcribes word-for-word, and organizes, edits, and rewrites the transcripts into a polished narrative. Once the manuscript is completed, photos and memorabilia can be added to enhance the story, and everything is laid out in book form and published for the author, his or her family, and friends.

In *Start & Run a Personal History Business*, space dictates that I focus only on personal history books, but these “how-to” guidelines and practices can be applied to a wide variety of products and formats, from audio or video recordings, books, quilts and art collages, to multimedia presentations on DVD. See Chapter 15 about some of the exciting possible ways to capture and preserve memories.

Personal historians preserve not only life stories, but also the histories of businesses, towns, families, places of worship, organizations, special-interest groups and ethnic groups, or groups such as veterans or hospice patients. Not everyone calls themselves a personal historian: there’s the corporate (or business) historian, community historian, public historian, legacy writer, biographer, memoir writer, ghost-writer, and oral historian, to name a few. A videobiographer is another professional in the field, using a camera and sophisticated equipment and software. Editors and coaches work on memoirs that are already written or are being written. Workshop leaders teach memoir writing. Others specialize in photograph restoration, archiving, writing obituaries, delivering eulogies (as “funeral celebrants”), graphic design, printing, and binding.

What these professions have in common is a passion for preserving the past. I hope that *Start & Run a Personal History Business* ignites that passion in you, too.

2. The World of Personal History

2.1 A business that’s timely — and timeless

This is a “hot” profession: a young industry with vast potential for income and growth.

When I started *Heritage Memoirs* in 2002, I just wanted a creative outlet for my interviewing, writing, and editing skills. Through my father’s death and my mother’s dementia, I had lost my own family stories and thought there could possibly be a business helping other people avoid that loss. I never dreamed that, five years later, the *Financial Post* would name what I was doing one of the top ten business opportunities, to “serve the needs of luxury-seeking, time-pressed and suddenly health-conscious Canadians.” It said: “Personal Memoirs. Create a record of peoples’ parents or ancestors as a memorialist and put it in a handsome bound book. Must be able to write.”

Interest in the field has caught on like wildfire. Personal historians and their clients have been featured in hundreds of major news outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Toronto Star*, *AARP: The Magazine*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Money*, *Worth*, *Real Simple*, *O Magazine* and on television programs like *The Oprah Show*. It’s no surprise the media loves stories about personal history projects. They have all the elements of a feel-good feature article: human interest, history, connecting generations, celebrating the “ordinary” person, family values. And there is the unique nature of the product itself: beautiful, one-of-a-kind books that will last for generations. It’s history — living history — in the making!

With a growing fascination in memoirs and genealogy, it was only a matter of time before entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to help people with their projects, but the term “personal historian” didn’t come into the mainstream until after 1995 when an enterprising group met in an eighteenth-century inn in New England. Mainly writers, they had carved out a niche market, getting paid to help people tell their life stories, and wanted a supportive network to discuss advances in the

field, interviewing and recording techniques, resources, pricing, and to otherwise build a business doing what they were doing. But what should they call themselves? They tossed around the phrases “memoir writer,” “historian,” “biography writer,” and others, and finally settled on personal historian. It did the best job of capturing what we do: help tell and preserve the history of a person. That group formed the Association of Personal Historians (APH), and it remains the premier group for “entrepreneur story-savers.”

2.2 The memoirs and genealogy phenomenon: Capturing the moment — Past, present, and future

In the past 15 years, interest in memoirs, genealogy, and family history has exploded. Memoirs consistently dominate the bestseller lists, and not just those written by celebrities (or their ghostwriters). People are reading memoirs of everyday people, like Frank McCourt with his Pulitzer-prize winning memoir, *Angela’s Ashes*. No longer are memoirs only written by the elderly. The midlife memoir is quite common and, as I was writing this book, two *American Idol* contestants, barely out of their teens, were reported to be writing their memoirs. Like peeking into someone’s diary, we are fascinated with other people’s lives; the appeal of the memoir crosses all economic, geographic, racial, ethnic, and age segments.

Along with reading about other people’s lives comes the passionate pursuit of writing about our own. Historically, writing one’s reminiscences was reserved for the elite; stories of everyday people, especially marginalized factions like the poor or women, were largely lost. Today there is a groundswell of memoir writers, meeting in libraries, church basements, and

online to support each other as they document their experiences and pass them down to future generations. Thousands of websites are also devoted to the memoir genre.

Genealogy — tracing your family history through your ancestors — is said to be the most popular pastime in North America and many other parts of the world. Largely thanks to the Internet, enthusiasts are almost obsessively researching their roots and discovering their lineage. At the time of writing this book, the Ancestry.com and Ancestry.ca websites have more than one million members and hundreds of thousands of forums. Television programs like *Ancestors in the Attic* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* attract millions of viewers. And following close on the heels of genealogy is the incredibly popular hobby of scrapbooking. All these trends — memoirs, genealogy, and scrapbooking — are about capturing “momentous memories”: the moments and times of our lives that are meant to be shared with those close to us, now and in the future.

But what’s behind this phenomenon?

2.3 Honoring the past in a rapidly changing world

With technology changing our world so rapidly, we are realizing the need to capture the “old ways” — before everyone forgets what they were like. We’re honoring the past like never before, and are hungry for firsthand accounts of people who were there and who themselves are living history. Before they pass away and their stories are lost forever, we are interviewing and recording Holocaust survivors, war veterans, refugees, workers whose jobs are disappearing, and others. Their stories are being preserved in hundreds of institutions, museums, and archives and produced in documentaries, movies, television programs, and books.

The stories behind heritage buildings and objects are gaining respect, too. If you watch *Antiques Roadshow*, you've probably noticed how the value skyrockets when the item has a story behind it. Buyers are willing to pay handsomely for "provenance," which refers to an object's origin, because it gives the item authenticity and a place in history. Auctioneers have known and capitalized on this for years.

It's happening in the business world, too, as more and more corporations honor their history, appeal to nostalgia, and leverage their stories. Grainy black and white photos of the first hamburger stand or gas station abound in advertisements. Some personal historians specialize in corporate history books, which because of their scope and high quality can easily run upward of \$40,000 and well beyond — a lucrative niche market.

Part of the reason we are getting better at documenting our history is because it's easier to do so, thanks to the Internet; digital cameras and recorders; and computers and software programs. It's ironic that advancements in technology are fostering this passion for preserving the past.

2.4 The need for story

It's getting easier and faster to tell each other what's happening in our lives through email, Twitter, Facebook, text messaging, blogging, camera phones, etc., but many feel the "soul" has gone out of our communication. Most of it is brief, fleeting, cut-to-the-chase, and lacks the contemplation and careful composition that handwritten letters have. And much of it is lost forever in cyberspace. We're storing thousands of digital photos on our computers and CDs or DVDs, but what happens when the computer crashes or a particular piece of equipment becomes obsolete? The moments

are being captured, but will they be preserved for the future? Will they be remembered? And what about the stories behind the photos?

People are craving meaningful connections — to ourselves, to each other, and to our roots and our future — and personal stories are a big part of that.

2.4a Once upon a (life) time: The power and endurance of story

Why is a life story a priceless gift for families, and for the storyteller? The world of personal histories is all about story, so let's start with one:

One day, an anthropologist who was staying with and studying a primitive African tribe wanted to see what effect a television would have on the society, so he brought one into the village and hooked it up. People gathered around the TV day and night, staring in wonder. But after a few days, they drifted away and took up their regular daily routines again and largely ignored the talking box.

The anthropologist was puzzled.

"Aren't you interested in the TV?" he asked.

A tribesman said, "Yes, it's very nice, but you see, we have our own storyteller."

"Yes," said the anthropologist, "but the TV knows many more stories than your storyteller."

"That may be true," said the tribesman, "but our storyteller knows us."

Though the term "personal history" may be relatively new, it is really an extension of

an ancient tradition of telling — and listening to — stories of our “tribes”: those closest to us. Those are the stories that resonate the loudest because they tell us where we’ve come from and help us understand ourselves. They provide context, connection, and continuity in a world that is increasingly busy and disconnected.

Storytelling is in our souls. For thousands of years, the elders of a family or society have used stories to teach, entertain, pass along wisdom, explain the world, share joy and heartache, and to preserve the history of the society, which was sometimes necessary for survival. Cave dwellers carved pictures of the hunt, and Egyptians saved recipes with hieroglyphics. Graffiti is the modern-day equivalent of “Kilroy was here.” As cavemen, we used to share stories sitting around the fire. More recently, we’d sit around the supper table, and not that long ago, it was common to have three generations living together. Our society is in danger of losing the passing along of wisdom and experiences from generations. As well, because of the distractions of computers, TVs, and video games, we’re a much more mobile and fractured society. People move away, parents divorce, and grandparents may not have the opportunity to verbally pass along family traditions, wisdom, and experience.

2.4b The magical bond created by storyteller and listener

No one will deny the immeasurable satisfaction of writing your memoirs, but it can be a daunting task, and not everyone has the skill, time, or physical and mental ability. Most people want to document their lives somehow but never get around to it, simply because it is so overwhelming. A personal historian can ensure everyone has the opportunity to save their stories, because almost everyone can talk. Telling, as opposed to writing, is a natural, easy-flowing way to express oneself; it’s faster; and the storyteller

doesn’t have to worry about grammar, punctuation, paragraph breaks, and all those writerly concerns, as the storyteller can just talk as the personal historian records what he or she says and can write it down later.

Most important, there is an interested audience. One-on-one, the narrator talks about his or her life while the personal historian assumes the most important of tasks: listening. As the listener — the keeper of the stories — you hold a position of great honor and trust. Your client is counting on you to understand and interpret his or her stories, some of which he or she may never have breathed a word about before sitting down with you. This creates a real bond between you and the narrator. At the best of times, it’s nothing less than a spiritual experience, as you share the drama, depth, and humanity of the moments. Emotions often run high, on both sides.

This special relationship is among the many rewards of being a personal historian. Most of your clients will agree that it’s far more appealing than sitting alone at a computer staring at a blank screen.

2.5 Mind, body, and spirit

2.5a The baby boomers and memoirs

It’s no accident that the surge of interest in journaling, memoirs, and family history has accompanied a more holistic approach to life. The Western world is discovering what has long been a tenet of Eastern philosophies and practice: There are undeniable connections between the mind, body, and spirit, and that we need health in all three areas in order to be happy and fulfilled. Baby boomers, generally, are more into healthy living, self-exploration, and self-discovery than any previous generation, and there are few activities more likely to enlighten

than examining and documenting your own life. Baby boomers are not known as the “me” generation for nothing.

The older generation is, generally, a humble one. Some think it’s vain to write about their lives. The boomers have no such qualms. They are more introspective; they think about their lives and what their purpose has been, whether they have made a difference, and whether they have lived the life they wanted. Why the heck did they take that job, or move there, or marry that person?

Baby boomers are more likely to admit mistakes too, and chalk them up as just another step in the journey to self discovery. The prevalence of tell-all memoirs, talk shows, and reality TV shows reflects an attitude of acceptance, openness, and candor. Baby boomers are approaching their later years and deaths with the same intense focus on themselves with which they live their lives. They’re planning their own funerals — celebrations of life — right down to the music, flowers, and what they want done with their remains. They want to be remembered — and celebrated — for who they really are.

2.5b The boomers’ parents

Many of the older generation first get prodded into doing their personal histories by their adult children. Boomers today want to know their parents’ and grandparents’ stories, and not only because they’re also their own stories. Boomers are the privileged generation, and they know it. They’re honoring their elders for their sacrifices in giving their children comfortable lives, university educations, lessons galore, and trips abroad. The younger generation wants to appreciate and understand what it’s like to fight a war, immigrate to a new country, or help to build a railroad. They want to get a sense of what desperation and hunger feel like — things many have never experienced.

Boomers want everything for their kids, too. Now that people are recording every waking minute of their children’s lives (including ultrasound images!), a huge piece of the puzzle would be missing if they didn’t also give them their roots and family history. Boomers are the Sandwich Generation, that is, they are between their parents, who are elderly and dying, and their children, who are quickly growing up. If those from the older generation aren’t documenting their lives for the family history book, it’s up to them. They are the storykeepers, the link between generations, feeling a yearning to preserve and pass down their parents’ experiences.

The problem is, most people are just way, way too busy. They lack the time and the knowledge to get it done.

Solution? Hire a professional.

Baby boomers are not shy about asking and paying for help when they need it. They are the generation that hires personal trainers, personal chefs, and personal shoppers. Why not a personal historian to make sure those family stories aren’t lost forever?

Boomers are the largest, wealthiest demographic in history. Many have made a lot of money in the dot-com and real estate markets, and are inheriting vast pockets of wealth. They’re used to paying a premium for top-quality items, especially unique items. David Foot, an economist at the University of Toronto and the author of *Boom, Bust & Echo*, predicts this huge demographic wave will be looking for products and services that are person-to-person rather than electronic or online. They will buy products that project history and quality of life. And they will see value in products that boost memory and brain power. A “biographer for hire” who can help them document and preserve their life stories will cater to all those demands.

2.5c Benefits for the storyteller

Many older people don't have a family member asking them to do their personal histories; they take the initiative themselves. They hire personal historians because they are motivated to tell their stories, put things in perspective, and leave something tangible and permanent that will be around long after they're gone.

Probably very few are aware that studies and surveys are proving that life review and reminiscence is great for health and well-being. Telling your life story, found the late Robert Butler, a Pulitzer-prize winning author renowned for his studies of healthy aging, has definite benefits, such as these stated in *Transformational Reminiscence: Life Story Work* by John Kunz and Florence Gray Soltys (Springer Publishing, 2007): "... finding meaning in life, improving problem-solving skills, assisting with the grief process, increasing emotional support, strengthening self-esteem, decreasing depression and anxiety ... " Personal historians witness these changes firsthand as clients report a sense of completion and newfound peace and contentment. The process of telling your life story is usually extremely satisfying for the narrator.

3. Genealogy and Personal History

Genealogy is not quite the same as personal history, at least the way I refer to personal history in this book. Genealogists research details and facts about deceased relatives to trace the family ancestry, while personal historians tell the stories of those who are still alive to tell the tale! You might say that genealogists answer the where, who, and when questions, while personal historians have the luxury of asking a living, breathing person the why, how, and what questions. Genealogists and personal historians

have traditionally lived in separate camps, but both are beginning to realize they have a lot in common and are borrowing tips and techniques from each other. The result is family history projects with more depth, detail, and appeal.

3.1 How a personal historian can work with a genealogist

Genealogists, both professional and hobbyists, are uncovering vast amounts of historical data, largely thanks to the Internet and more sophisticated searching techniques. But all too often, once they've uncovered the names, dates, charts, and documents, that's where it ends. The piles of paper are not all that accessible for sharing. They're not even that interesting, especially to the younger generation. Enter the captivating power of story. A personal historian can write a narrative that brings life to that material, illustrating it with images of maps, newspaper clippings, etc., that tells the story behind those dear departed relatives and the places and times they lived.

By the same token, personal historians can enhance their projects using the tools in a genealogist's toolbox. Besides adding important background information, research can trigger more memories, verify guesses about where ancestors settled, flesh out details about an ocean voyage, and uncover other details that add depth and context to a person's memoir. These can include:

- maps — both historic and current — about places the narrator mentions, or that illustrate a person's or family's migration over the years
- wills, birth and death certificates, military papers, census pages, passenger records
- family trees that clarify relationships

Linda Coffin, a Minneapolis, Minnesota, personal historian with extensive training and experience in genealogy, shares this example of how she used genealogy tools to enhance a personal history project:

“An elderly client wanted to know more about her mother’s Polish Catholic family. Since her Polish grandfather cut off her mother for marrying an English Protestant, she doesn’t have any leads. We started with the census, which shows the structure of her mother’s family, listing the grandfather and grandmother as a young couple with three children. A World War I draft registration database gives her a physical description of her grandfather, his address in 1917, and the name of a brother who was listed as a family contact. City directories provide address listings for both the grandfather and his brother. Since the draft card also lists the grandfather’s employer, business records can provide more information on his occupation. A search of the Catholic parish records for that part of the city opens a gold mine of information on baptisms, marriages, and burials. Land records show that the grandfather eventually moved to another state and died there. Ultimately, the client has a reunion with her second cousins — the grandchildren of the brother named on the draft registration card.”

Personal historians can do some genealogical research themselves, starting with websites such as Ancestry.com/ca, NARA.com (National Archives), and Rootsweb.com, as well as regional and local historical societies. However, hiring a professional genealogist, which can be found through the Association of Professional Genealogists at www.apgen.org, might save time and guarantee a more productive search. They are trained and experienced in using many types of repositories (archives or places of storage and preservation), and they know how to look for specific information in the right places.

Many have special areas of expertise: documents such as court records, vital records or passenger records. Others specialize by locality, such as German research, or research in Pennsylvania. Others are experts in certain repositories such as the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, or the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

If genealogy is your passion and you want to learn more, the National Genealogical Society (www.ngsgenealogy.org) offers a 16-month intensive correspondence course.

The Family History Library in Salt Lake City, the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne (Indiana), the Newberry Library in Chicago, Stamford University in Birmingham (Alabama), and the National Archives in Washington DC have frequent workshops and ongoing classes. The University of Toronto offers several online Certificates in Genealogical Studies with specialization in various countries.

4. Ten Essential Things You’ll Learn from This Book

If you’ve been reading from page 1, you’ll have an idea of what personal historians do and whether this is something you might seriously consider. Here are ten essential things you’ll learn from this book to help you start and run your personal history business:

- The personal historian’s toolkit: what you need to succeed
- Who your clients are
- Where to find clients
- How to price your product for profit
- Finding your niche
- Communicating the value of your services

- How to market yourself
- Tips for the introvert: you *can* do sales *and* public speaking
- The best resources for ongoing education
- The art of listening: a primer on interviewing (the heart of personal history)

5. Summary

The field of memoirs, family history, and preserving history is becoming more sophisticated. Digital photography, technology, and the Internet have made it easier to create and unearth the raw material — genealogical information and family trees, scans of old photographs, etc. — but often, the material sits unorganized and in danger of being forgotten and scattered. One solution is to hire a professional to help properly preserve these family stories and photographs and present them in a way that is attractive and accessible for future generations.

Technology is speeding up communication but making us hungry for meaningful

connections. We need to hear the stories of our ancestors, parents, and ourselves, and we're realizing the need to preserve them permanently.

When it comes to the “close to the heart” issues of family values and heritage, people are willing to pay a premium for a high-quality product that reflects their individuality and character. The typical customer is in the mid-to upper-income bracket.

Busy baby boomers are likely to hire a professional who has the skills, experience, and time to interview themselves or older family members to capture their stories.

The core values of this business — love, living life to the fullest, memories, family, heritage, and history — hold immense appeal for boomers and their parents. These values will never go out of style and will weather recessions and economic downturns.

Though the values are timeless, the timing couldn't be better for a business that's about family values, personal fulfillment, a holistic approach to aging, connecting generations, and preserving history.