

Project StoryKeeper and LifeLenz

PROJECT STORYKEEPER and related venture — LifeLenz — have a mission to preserve American heritage by capturing and sharing the life stories of all Americans. The stories obtained via Project StoryKeeper can then be posted on the Internet at LifeLenz for family and friends to enjoy, preserve and add to for generations to come.

Dennis Stack, Founder of Project StoryKeeper, says that he “personally did not know [his] parents all that well, and by the time they passed away, it was too late.”

This mirrors some of my own reasoning for my foray into genealogy many years ago. I never met or knew my father’s paternal family and then my mother died relatively young and, before I realized that I knew little of her life, she and other family members had died. From experience, I can share that, for all the research I did and the successes I achieved in learning about my family, much is missing.

For example, I learned from an old childhood friend that my mother won awards for piano playing, and from a church she was associated with that she performed in plays. While she was alive, I never knew any of this and I know that there is so much more about her that has not been captured or remembered.

PROJECT STORYKEEPER

www.storykeeper.org

The project involves recruiting 100,000 StoryKeepers, ideally

those that already work or could work within elder care settings, such as hospices, assisted living facilities and home care agencies. StoryKeepers will be trained on how to use a special “audio biography kit”, which includes questions to ask, interviewing techniques to be used in drawing out the personal histories of senior citizens within those facilities.

Proper training is essential since a StoryKeeper’s job of capturing a life story — with all its

— is essential to lively and enthusiastic storytelling. There are stories that someone won’t tell to a family member that they will tell to a stranger. Often, those are not the stories of triumph, yet the ones experienced by everyone.

Besides the gathering of the stories, there are wonderful benefits to the project.

- Stack has found that the process of gathering a person’s personal history is equally therapeutic for both the “keeper” and the teller. “For the teller, there is an element of joy, healing, and escape involved in reliving their past with someone new,” said Stack. “The memories, for them, are priceless.”
- “For the StoryKeeper, we’ve found that facilitating the interview makes their time of service so much more interesting and enjoyable... their relationship with these seniors is

much more rewarding.”

- Storytellers and their families then have a permanent audio record on the Internet of that person’s life — as Stack puts it, “who they are”. They can then refer to the interview on their own family website, add to it and cherish it for years to come. “Today, there’s a huge disconnect between teenagers and their elders,” said Stack. “When [people] get older, they’ll come to realize how important it was to know their senior family members... [The memories] will [now] be preserved so they can be there for future generations.”



Diane Richard's mother, Margaret Joyce Fountain, second from right, playing a maid, was part of the cast in a play held at Zion Church, in Lancashire, England during 1955.

joys, sorrows, lessons and laughter — is a specialized skill. “It’s not as easy as just putting a microphone in front of someone,” said Tom Cormier, Executive Director of Project StoryKeeper. “We have developed a process based on several years of conducting thousands of interviews; there are special techniques to getting the interviewee warmed up, opened up and speaking freely and openly.”

Cormier also stresses that the process is best left to a third-party StoryKeeper, since having a fresh listener — one that’s unbiased with family history and politics

- We also discussed how, in an age of phone calls, text messages, e-mails and other short-term media, there is becoming a dearth of documented history.
- We compared Alzheimer's to a computer crash without a back-up. How do we back-up the knowledge, experiences and stories of someone before they experience the full onset of this devastating disease?

Individuals wishing to sign-up for Project StoryKeeper training can contact the organization at 1-800-873-5317 or visit www.storykeeper.org

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

The aspects of "training" and a "third party" are ones that I can readily identify with. My maternal family did, and still does, live in England, and I wrote letters to my Gran and two of her cousins for many years. My Gran probably always wondered at the motives for my letters as I was always peppering her with questions. And, the few times that I traveled to England and visited her, after some pleasantries and general visiting, I would ask more questions. Out of that, I did get to see family photos previously unknown to me and get some answers to my questions. Though, these issues arose:



A photo of Diane Richard's Gran, Elsie Taylor, as a little girl in c. 1909 with her parents Ernest Taylor and Mary Nelson.

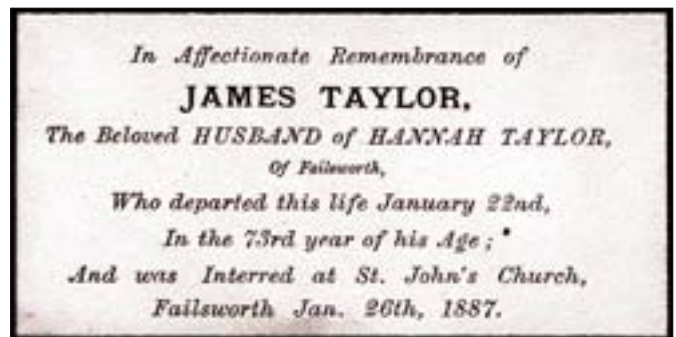
- I was so busy taking notes on little scraps of paper that many were unintelligible or indecipherable by the time that I got home and was trying to remember what we talked about.
- In the course of writing my notes, I missed "hearing" part of the story.

- I didn't know all the right questions to ask.
- I would get distracted by what I would hear and then re-direct the conversation and not let my Gran reminisce freely.
- I didn't really ask her all the small bits that make up a life — I was so focused on the ancestors and my mother, who had passed away.

The result was that, even for my Gran, when I pulled together all the information I had, including photos of her as a youth, some information about her schools, the hardware store she owned, and much more, there was still a sterility to the tale — I had not gathered all the little and colorful stories that truly breathe life into anyone's existence.

Fortunately for me, Auntie Edith, one of Gran's cousins who I wrote to, was a wonderful letter writer and drafted a series of vignettes about growing up and the incidences, quirks and the stories of the various family members, including my Gran and mother. I now treasure these all too brief glimpses into these individuals as people. They make me hunger to hear more.

And, remember all those questions I asked? Well, I spent years researching my mother's



The memorial card for James Taylor found in Diane Richard's Gran's family Bible. After many years of research, the information on the card pinpointed his death date and burial location.

"A WINDOW OF MEMORIES" BY EDITH (LEWIS) WARBURTON:

"I remember the day Elsie first came (to live with them at Garden Suburb), she had been to work in Manchester and at tea time, she breezed in saying "Hello, here's your new lodger, complete with hot water bottle."

"One thing did worry her, Elsie had a rather sallow complexion and white satin and net and lace wedding dresses didn't do a thing for it. But, that was the proper thing in those days, white signified purity, virginity and goodness knows what else and when Elsie opted for a blue outfit, eyebrows rose to amazing heights. Her Mum & Dad were very disturbed, but so very relieved when Margaret, your mum, didn't proclaim her arrival till well after the 'respectable' date."

"Elsie had taken Margaret to stay with her Mum and Dad



Cousins Edith (Auntie Edith), on the right, and Elsie (Diane Richard's Gran) c. 1934.

in Derby for a few weeks. They went on a shopping spree in town and decided to have "elevenses". Auntie Mary was a very particular person and nothing but the best would do for her. So they ended up in Derby's poshest (and most expensive) restaurant. Elsie and her mum were chatting and eating their toasted tea cakes and drinking coffee quite happily, when it was suddenly brought to their notice that young Margaret, tucked away (safely, as they thought) in her pushchair, had been doing a bit of exploring and having found a loose corner, had happily stripped off several large pieces of very expensive flock wallpaper! (A girl after my own heart!) I don't know how much it cost Auntie Mary to get out of that one, but I bet she never went in that shop again."

family, corresponding with distant family members. After about 10 years of research, we finally found the death date, cemetery and other details about several elusive family members. But, last year, a few years after my Gran died at the age of 93, I remembered that she had mentioned a Taylor family Bible. I had always assumed that it was the source of the family information she shared with me. So, to make sure that my files were somewhat complete, I wrote to my uncles and asked if they would photocopy any pages with data and any inserted documents. I was so excited the day I received the packet and I was floored to find that the funeral cards and other papers for several of those elusive family members had been stored in the family Bible all along! Obviously, in all those years, I had never asked her directly about the Bible and its contents!

Now, let's talk briefly about two StoryKeeper related elements.

CAPTURING LIFE'S STORIES KITS
I've talked about the more institutional use of Project StoryKeeper as a means to capture the stories and memories of those populations most at risk for the imminent loss of their stories — those in hospices, nursing homes, suffering from the early stages of dementia, etc. It is also recognized that many more individuals are also interested in preserving their own memories or those of family members. To aid in this, there are kits available for purchase that include either cassette tapes or CDs (the latter allows the inclusion of digital photos) and most importantly, a booklet that gives an overview on how to have a successful experience and pages of suggested questions that you might ask yourself or

whomever is the focus of the interview.

Based on my experience, I know that the following questions are some of the ones that I wish I had asked my mother and my Gran:

- What were you like as a child?
- Who was your best friend?
- What was your favorite food and favorite thing to do?
- What was your most memorable birthday?

The list goes on.

LIFELENZ

www.LifeLenz.com

To further the mission of Project StoryKeeper and build upon recent advancements in technology, a companion initiative is the creation of a social network website, LifeLenz, that is the fulfillment of the storykeeping process, and lets users take advantage of online multi-media tools to communicate with family members;

create, post and archive family photos, audio, video and written information; and preserve their family heritage for others to enjoy now and for years to come.

American Storykeepers is the parent company launching LifeLenz.com.

According to Stack, "It ties together the whole process of storykeeping because it is the perfect vehicle to upload so many different aspects of a person's life, and utilize everything that multi-media has to offer to capture their thoughts, their actual voice, their photos, videos, all of their memories. In addition, it is an excellent resource and way for professionals, caregivers and their families to communicate about a loved one's situation. We are, in effect, re-inventing the extended family."

The LifeLenz.com website itself has been developed with use by the elderly in mind, with simple graphic presentation, clear instructions and easy-to-read tabs leading to the features of the site. Users will have their own home page and profile, as well as areas for "My Photo Album", "My Online Friends", "My Journals", "My Audios", "My Videos", etc.

A feature of this new online digital environment is that it's an easy way for grandparents to share stories with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, regardless of where they live. It uses a means that creates links with the more tech savvy younger generations. Additionally, once information is posted, others can "comment" or supplement what is there, we now have an easy means for grandma to share a memory of an event, her daughter can post a photo of the event, and other family members can comment on what they remember of the event — essentially, create a "collective memory."

CONCLUSION

We are all on a journey; without the capturing and documenting and sharing of memories, so much will be lost. Everyone faces

challenges — our ancestors faced challenges, possibly similar to ours. We are not alone in our journey. Shared experiences don't have to occur in real time. In reading my Auntie Edith's stories, my mother, grandmother and extended family were brought alive to me in a way that my research failed to achieve — I also realized that for how often I have always thought that my mother and I were not alike, I really learned that we have more in common than not!

And, I have always struggled, as I suspect many have, with documenting my family in such a manner that they aren't just remembered as a collection of dates and activities. I want everyone to be able to visualize their life, not just the grand and glorious elements, but the mundane. I now know that the everyday minutiae and intimate stories of life actually provide much more insight into someone than just their accomplishments! Project StoryKeeper and LifeLenz are a means to capture these important details so that memories are not lost and stories are shared.



Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for more than 20 years. Part of her passion for genealogy is capturing the lives and memories of her family and ancestors. She currently does professional research in NC and can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy.

Have you hit a brick WALL?

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SEARCH YOUR SURNAME

Your surname could already be part of a current project or, you could qualify to start a new Surname Project. Family Tree DNA provides a full spectrum of management tools for those interested in a Surname Project to focus on a surname or subset of a surname to determine who is related to whom.

FAMILY TREE DNA ALLOWS TO:

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- Determine if two people descended from the same ancestor
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- Find out who with your surname is related
- Prove or disprove a research theory
- Find others to whom you are related
- Get clues about your ethnic origin

DATABASE MATTERS: Family Tree DNA has the largest comparative database in the world with over 180,000 records and counting.

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