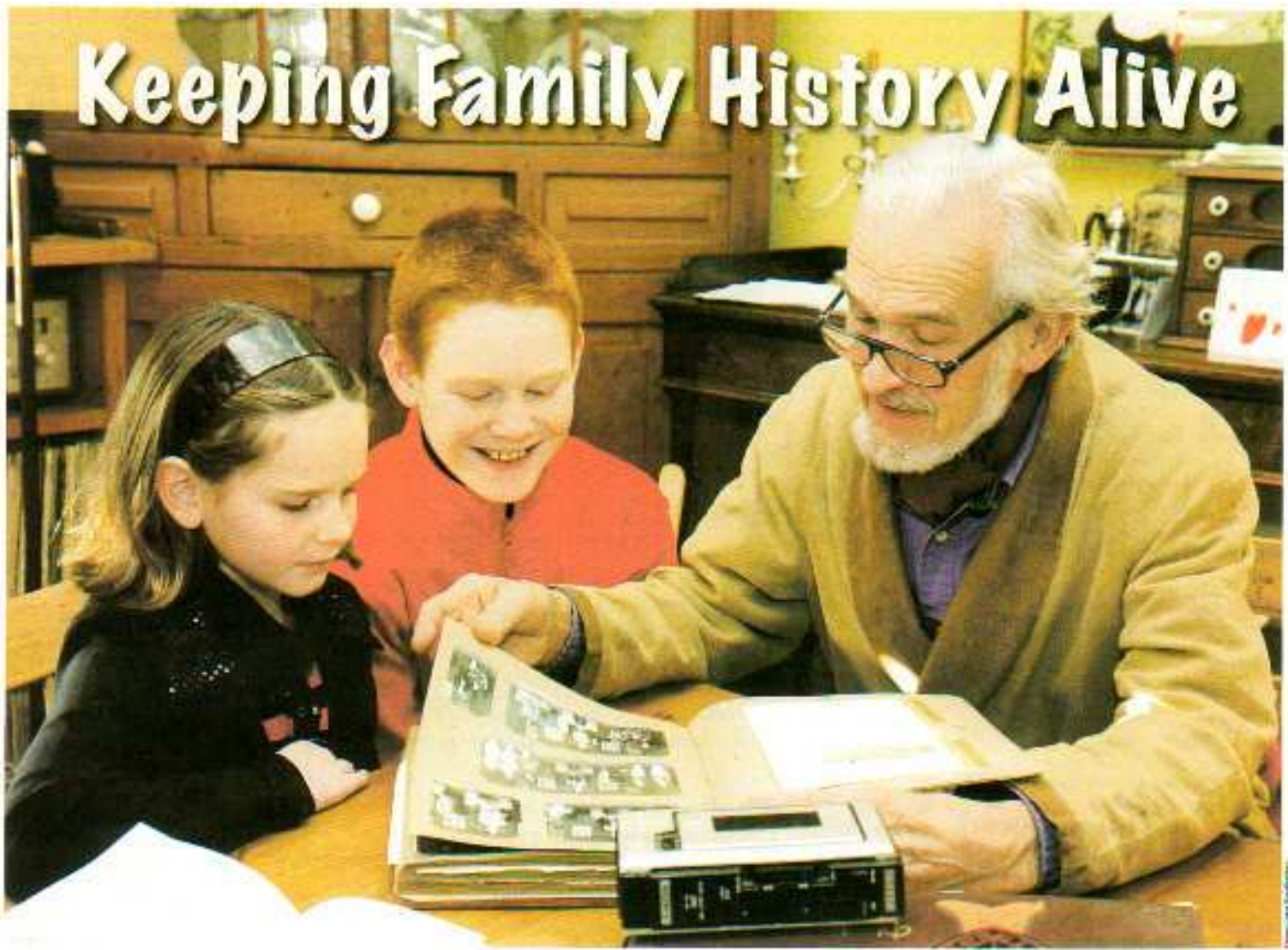


Keeping Family History Alive



By capturing a grandparent's life story on paper, kids can learn a lot about their history – and themselves.

by Joanne Culley

When I was a child, I loved it when my grandparents would start talking about the good old days. They led very glamorous lives, playing together as a piano duo on the radio, touring South Africa and England, even entertaining the king at Royal Albert Hall in London. I would beg them to get out their photo albums so that I could see for myself the beautiful dresses my grandmother wore and the ocean liner they travelled on.

I'm so glad those stories were not lost in time because they continue to delight me and I've been able to pass them on to my children. Family stories

that it's a good idea to try and preserve them. What better way than to have your child write the life history of a grandparent or other older relative as a present to the relative and to the family?

Bringing history to life

Older people like talking about their early lives, says writer Mary J. Breen, a teacher of creative non-fiction at Trent University. "They want their children and grandchildren to know about their struggles and achievements, what they went through in the war, or to talk about their own

known. A participant in one of my classes said that she is happy to tell her American grandchildren about growing up in Newfoundland as their experience of being raised in the United States will be quite different from hers."

Knowledge of their family roots helps children develop a sense of belonging, as well as bringing history to life. My son Peter was studying World War II last year and one of his assignments was to interview his two grandparents about their involvement in the war. Both men were in non-combat roles – one had been a conscientious objector, serv-

had been in the RCAF band, stationed in England. My son's research sparked discussion around the dinner table about the morality of war and what circumstances justify war. My son wondered aloud about what his decision would have been if he had been asked to fight.

Sometimes finding out family history helps to put the pieces of a puzzle together. Upon learning that his grandfather loved to draw, your son may discover the origins of his own artistic talents. Or your daughter who plays hockey may be surprised to find out that her grandmother was a member of a women's softball league when she was young.

Talking to grandparents or other older relatives can be a real eye-opener for a young person. "To see people who are now old as young and beautiful – that's creating a very special moment," says Breen. "I'll never forget the shock I felt when I learned that my mother, who was very proper and quite stiff with arthritis, led a dance band in the 1920s!"

Hearing a relative's life story lets your child get to know the person better and helps to forge a stronger relationship and respect between the generations. To know that a parent or grandparent lived through the Depression, faced unemployment, or came to Canada with \$10 in their pocket, can help a child draw the strength and support he needs to face the challenges of being a teen today, while showing him that he's not so different after all from his grandfather.

A knowledge of family history can also help motivate a child. For instance, if your son likes to go canoeing, he might be intrigued to find out that his great-grandfather was the captain of a sailing ship that travelled to Africa in the last century.

The older they get, the more our kids will appreciate family stories.

Writing a life story

How does your child go about writing a life story of a grandparent or an older relative? One way to start the process is through a series of interviews – if your child is old enough to do this.

Encourage her to make up a list of questions to ask her grandparent (see examples in the sidebar). Then provide her with a notebook and pen, a tape re-

order or video camera and set her to it. There will likely be too many questions for one sitting, so it's a good idea to set up a few sessions either in person or by phone.

Don't get too hung up on technology – if the older relative is too self-conscious to talk while a tape recorder is running, turn it off. If your child is not sure she wants to do the interview alone, you can sit in on the session, but try not to be too intrusive or contradict the person's story – the point is to hear it from the relative's viewpoint.



Aunt Mella arrives in Winnipeg



Grandpa Harvey on family day



Aunt Cozy holding grand and Grandpa Cherry

If the grandparent lives far away, and is comfortable using a computer, the child could send her questions via email and receive the answers the same way or by phone. If your child is very young, you could write down the questions for her in a letter. It will be very exciting for her to receive the answers back in a personally addressed envelope.

It may be difficult for an older person to remember exactly when and in what order incidents happened. Asking general thematic questions may inspire more discussions than trying to fix a date to each event. Another way to retrieve memories is to open up an old photo album and ask for the story behind each picture. Remarkable on special objects on display in the china cabinet could also spark some fascinating tales.

After the interviews, the child can enter the information into the computer under certain themes, such as school, family, everyday activities, celebrations, etc., borrow a selection of photos to scan, and create a "book." The end result is only limited by how much time he wants to spend on it. He can design a cover, perhaps incorporating

a photo of the subject in her youth, come up with a catchy title and lay it out in an artistic way. He could present the life story to the subject at a special occasion, such as a birthday or anniversary, and keep a second copy for the rest of the family.

"A life story can be the most precious heirloom or gift you can give your family," says Breen. A life history may also be appreciated in the broader community, for instance by a historical society, church, synagogue or legion.

Interview Questions

Here are some possible questions to spark the memories of an older relative.

1. What's your earliest memory?
2. Tell me about your early childhood.
3. Describe a typical school day.
4. Did you have a favourite teacher? What was your favourite subject?
5. What did you do for fun as a child, such as tag, playing, skating, games, crafts, etc.?
6. Tell me about your family. Where were your parents born and where did they grow up? Do you have any siblings? If so, where they are now?
7. Did you grow up on a farm, in the city, or in another country?
8. What were your favourite foods? Do you still have the recipes?
9. Did your family go on vacation?
10. Tell me about any special celebrations you had, such as birthdays, Christmas, Hanukkah, or Ramadan.
11. Are there any special traditions, favourite sayings, home remedies or superstitions that you remember?
12. Do you remember your first job?
13. Did you have a best friend?
14. What did you want to be when you grew up?
15. When did you get your first job and what was it?
16. How did you meet your spouse? Describe your wedding and who was there. And if you know, how did your own parents meet?
17. Were you or any of your relatives involved in either of the World Wars?
18. Are there any names that recur in the family?
19. Do you know how and when your family came to Canada?

Resources

There are some excellent books and websites to help you develop your family stories. Here are a few:

Bringing the Story Home: The Complete Guide to Storytelling for Parents, Leo Joplin, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000

A Family Remembers, Paul McLaughlin, North Vancouver, B.C.: Self Counsel Press, 1993

kinz.com, a free website where participants can create a family journal and get ideas for preserving their family story

heerink.com, click on "write your family history" for ideas

Why not use your family to tap into what American sociologist Elsie Boulding calls the "100-year present?" When an older person talks about their parents, we can journey up to 100 years into the past, and if your children hear those stories and pass them on to their grandchildren, those stories could survive 100 years into the future. What a valuable legacy to leave.

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