



RETIREMENT LIVING

Preserve the History Of Your Family

➤ **RETIRED LAWYER GENE WATSON, 84, OF MESA, ARIZ., HAS** never gotten around to writing his autobiography, as his three daughters often requested. So five years ago, his daughters hired **Family Legacy Video** to interview Watson. The finished product was a 90-minute documentary.

“It was a gift to me but also a gift to the entire family,” says Watson. For instance, his seven grandchildren had never met their grandmother, who died in 1984, and knew little about Watson’s parents or even Watson’s two years of service in the Army during the Korean War.

Like Watson, many people are interested in passing down a legacy of memories to younger generations. Those memories, whether they are preserved as old photos, letters, home movies or grandpa’s army medals, are often irreplaceable. Yet many families fail to take the steps that are necessary to prevent these precious memories and mementos from disappearing.

Many people have a natural curiosity about where they come from. “If you start researching your family when you are young, your curiosity builds,” says David Allen Lambert, chief genealogist at the New England Historic Genealogical Society, a private research library in Boston. “A memory is a link in a chain,” says Lambert, 49, who began interviewing his grandmother

about their family history when he was seven.

But even if your interest in your family history was piqued more recently, it's better late than never to take steps to preserve that history. Genealogists and other preservation experts offer advice.

■ **Photographs.** Curating family photos from the thousands that are often unsorted in shoeboxes or deteriorating in albums can be overwhelming.

According to Cathi Nelson, chief executive officer of the Association of Personal Photo Organizers, a new industry has sprung up to help people systemize their collections. Organizers typically charge an hourly fee ranging from \$50 to \$125. They work with clients to determine which photos tell a family story and should be preserved, and then they help clients discard the rest, which is about 80% of most collections.

Whether you hire a professional or do it yourself, Nelson has developed a sorting method called the ABCS. A is for "album worthy" photos, to be saved, digitized, backed up and shared with other relatives for safekeeping.

B is for "box"—these are photos that you save for the future in a container, such as acid-free boxes that protect against mold and moisture. Upon further reflection, you can throw them out or digitize them.

C is for "can," as in garbage can—photos that are duplicates, blurry or pictures of scenery can be trashed. "Be brutal and get rid of them," Nelson says.

S is for "story"—a photo that illustrates a significant memory. For example, a photo of a sapling planted in the backyard may not seem meaningful, unless it was the tree you planted when your son was born, Nelson says. These photos should be put in a special container for later review, and write each photo's story on an index card before it is forgotten.

Most people have trouble remembering the exact chronology of their photos. But that issue disappears if you organize by theme, such as birthdays or travel.

Once the photos are organized and scanned, store them on a flash drive, on your computer and in the cloud, and share them with other family members. Or make a digital photo book for yourself and other relatives. Scanning doesn't have to be expensive: Google PhotoScan is free and works on a smartphone.

■ **Home movies.** Many families have saved home movies on old film or videotape. "You have to be careful. If you project them on the old projector, you can break the film because it shrinks over time," says photo researcher Maureen Taylor, who owns The Photo Detective, in Providence, R.I. The best strategy is to transfer

the movies from outdated formats, such as regular or super 8mm film, VHS, and DVDs, into a digital format such as MP4 files.

Don't have old home movies? Capture family history at the next family gathering. Younger relatives can interview the older generation on audio or video.

■ **Go pro.** Some families go the route of making their own personal documentaries. Steve Pender, president of Family Legacy Video, in Tucson, Ariz., has been in business since 2003. "Most of our clients are 50 and over—boomers who hire us to record their parents and grandparents," he says.

For a fee ranging from \$7,500 up to \$40,000, Pender and his staff collect photos, keepsakes and home movies, and interview family members. Then Pender and his camera crew visit the subject at home for a day or more of recorded audio and video interviews. "For the person telling his or her life story, often for the first time, it reinforces self-worth and is a validation of a meaningful life," he says. In the finished film, the team also edits in newsreels, footage of historical events and other relevant archival materials. The process could take from a month to four months to complete.

■ **Other memorabilia.** Denise Levenick, a high school teacher in Pasadena, Calif., started a blog, "The Family Curator," in 2007 to document her work researching the contents of a trunk she inherited from her grandmother. "I didn't know what I had, and I wanted to preserve it," she says. Among the items in the trunk were a long braid of red hair, World War II ration books and letters.

Don't keep stuff in an unheated garage, attic, shed or other drafty, dirty places, says Levenick. Move heirlooms and keepsakes inside your house. "Museums and archives aim for a relative humidity of 50% and 68 degree temperature," she says. Levenick stores papers, photos and other keepsakes in acid-free archival boxes until they can be sorted and organized.

Levenick uncovered many interesting facts about her grandmother. Born in 1890, her grandmother was married five times, twice to the same man; she earned a living as a secretary and as a waitress at a "Harvey House"—a restaurant associated with the railroads. "So many of us lose the memory of our own families within three generations," says Levenick.

But by connecting with old photos, documents and other memorabilia, you can trace your roots. "The next generation does care," Nelson says. "Once they have their own kids, they want to know more about those who came before them." **K BETH BROPHY**