

Write Your Own Life Story

How To Get It Done!



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Author's Note

No doubt, there is very little of this booklet you either don't know about or haven't thought of before. In my way of helping, I've organized these thoughts in such a way that it will easily guide you in writing *your* story.

There is nothing hard about it even if you have to tell your story to someone who'll record it on paper, a CD, or DVD. The important thing to remember is *just do it!* If you wait too long and someone has to write about you in the past tense, then you've given up a precious right. No one in this world knows your life better than you do. And I'm sure there are parts of it you would like to keep unpublished.

I'm sure at one time, you must've thought about doing this or you wouldn't have read this far. So, what's stopping you?

PART I

Quite often, I'm asked, "*How do I write my life's story?*"

In one short sentence, I say: "Write down your thoughts, record your voice, and take some pictures; or, just simply tell your story to a friend or relative who will transcribe your words the way you tell it."

Of course, it isn't that simple or everyone would be doing it. But the truth is a majority of matriarchs and patriarchs of the family are long gone before their stories have been told.

By the time you have reached the age of sixty, or even beyond, you no doubt will have pondered your life and wondered whether or not it has meant anything to anyone. Believe you me, it has! Someone will care. But no matter what you think, someone in your life will care and will want to know the true you.

During my more than forty-plus years of journalism, much of my writings and interviewing experiences have had to do with biographical sketches of people telling me their stories. For the past twelve years, I have produced and hosted “Living Legacies,” a thirty-minute TV program where I interview folks, mostly senior citizens, who tell me the stories of their lives.

Granted, no one's story can be jammed into a thirty-minute program, but I can tell you that the many who have returned to the show have told me how their interviewed

experience spurred the interest of their children, grandkids, and their even great-grandkids. And in a sense it's a shame because many times, all a family has left is that thirty-minute DVD telling short stories of the yesteryear.

Everyone has a story to tell—and the most important person to tell that story is you. What you think may have been a mundane experience of the past could very well be a

worthy story of today. But you just never know until you get some ink on your hands.

* * * * *

Now, don't become discouraged if your family doesn't immediately jump at the bit to know more about your life. With all I've accomplished and the many places around the world I've traveled, my family knows very little about it. It isn't because they don't care, it's just they haven't gotten around to thinking it's all that important to them at this time in their lives.

In as much as we hate to admit it, the closer we come to the great unknown, the less interest our descendants take-in on who we are and what we've done. It usually isn't until after the coffin is nailed shut that questions begin to arise. "What was that story Dad used to tell us about," or, "Did Mom really do that during the war?" And, "I didn't know Uncle Harry robbed that bank!" But you get the idea.

I've had myself interviewed on my own TV show, but neither my son nor my daughter has ever watched it. My grandkids don't even know these programs exist. The same goes for my seven books I've written over the past thirty years. Those with pictures have been perused, but sitting down and actually turning pages on a good novel is something the young folk of today do very little. A shame actually.

However, my daughter claimed she read into the second chapter of my first novel and my son breezed through a family history photo album I put together. Not much else; that's about it.

They really haven't thought much about how I made a living for all those years. Yes, they knew I was in public relations and was a newspaperman, but not much else.

I recently wrote and published a 120-page book with photos of the many interviews and encounters I had with famous people—movies stars, politicians, athletes, world war

heroes. I wrote it to make sure I got everything down and documented as best I could, “*Before the colors fade,*” as the late American journalist Harry Reasoner once said before he died in 1991. So, don't be offended if your family doesn't clamor over getting to your story. I guarantee you that some time in the future it will be very important to them. Especially when they start reviewing their own lives.

* * * * *

Now, memory is a tricky thing. Some of us have better recollections than others. Some of us lose memories in the early senior years. On the other hand, some never lose it at all!

I wrote the biography of a dear friend who recently turned ninety early this past spring. In doing my interviews to gain his story, he never once wavered to any question I asked.

He recalled, in minute detail, every aspect of his robust life. And, in many cases, he had the documentation and photos to back it up. Without a doubt, a rare feat indeed.

And, then there are people who can't remember what they had for breakfast. But then again, that's probably not all that bad. They still have a good chance of remembering key points in their life. And that's good.

I have a very good recall of the highlights and important dates of my life. I vividly recall my mother, aunt, and grandmother huddled around the radio, crying, while Dad, Uncle Dean, and Granddad Morrow stood in silence as the radio announced the attack on Pearl Harbor; I was two and a half years old.

Few believe that, but it's true. I've asked my son if he recalls a ride in an airplane I took him on when he was three years old. Yes, he remembers; but he has no recollection of being in Hawaii at the time. I was stationed there in the Navy. My daughter has only vague recollections of my father—her grandfather; she was eleven years old when he died.

Then there are memories we tuck deep in our minds we'd just as soon forget. But,

sooner or later, bits and pieces begin to surface and stories start to flourish. More than likely, these memories come from veterans of foreign wars.

For the past fifteen or so years, former World War II soldiers, airmen, and seamen have flooded the book-publishing world with memories from the past—many dramatic and told for the very first time; yet these revelations are important to themselves as well as their families.

My Uncle Max was a pilot flying a B-17 Flying Fortress over Bavaria Germany on October 14, 1943 in what was to be known as the 2nd raid on Schweinfurt. That day more than 3,000 American flyboys took to the skies in an attempt to knockout Germany's ball bearing factories.

But before the day was out, more than 600 airmen were killed or captured. My uncle was captured. That day, and for the rest of his life, “Black Thursday” would forever be etched in his memory.

The idea for the raid was to bring the Nazi war machine to a grinding halt. This raid was my uncle's second mission. He and most of his crew survived and would spend the next eighteen months in Stalag Luft I near Barth, Germany. He left through the prison compound gates only when the war was over.

For more than forty years, Max refused to talk of his experiences. Then suddenly, as if the floodgates of his memory were opened, he relished discussing his experiences. He then dug-out his diary and opened it up; he had kept it during his captivity.

But, he couldn't remember where his base was in England.

“I have no idea,” he laughed. “I wasn't there that long—never did get off the base. I followed the plane ahead of me into the base, and I did the same thing on my first bombing mission over and back. My navigator knew, but I had my hands full just keeping that kite in the air.”

An honest answer where many would simply have filled in the blanks not wanting to disappoint. But, Max's truthful answer was better than anything else he could have ever conjured up.

I interviewed a Navy enlisted man who had spent the war in the Philippines as a guerrilla. He was one of the troops caught behind Japanese lines in the early days of the war.

His commanding officer was a U.S. Navy ensign. Their exploits were partially reenacted in the post-war movie, "American Guerilla in the Philippines," starring Tyrone Power.

He didn't think his story was all that significant until he mentioned one incident that resulted in a key battle and a significant point in history. His job was a coast watcher.

He would radio his command post that was later forwarded to the Navy. One day he saw a long line of Japanese ships going through the San Bernardino Straits south of the main island of Luzon. The report was

sent ahead to the Navy that was waiting in ambush when the Japanese arrived at Guam.

The result was the “Marianas Turkey Shoot.” The Japanese fleet, and much of its aircraft, was destroyed. My guy, in the guest's chair during my TV show, made it happen.

He didn't think it was all that big of a deal because much of what he did was pushed aside from his memory. He saw things he didn't want to remember, but they came flooding back as the end of his life was near.

Many Korean and Vietnam War veterans are coming forth with their unwanted memories.

They now want to pen their exploits and how they experienced those events.

A retired banker recalled playing pool with Charles Lindbergh on several afternoons at the San Diego YMCA while he awaited Ryan Aircraft to finish his “Spirit of St. Louis.”

A retired Congressman once told me he watched “Lindy” over the skies of San Diego making test flights in his plane before zooming across the country.

Dozens of other stories have been relayed to me during my years of writing. They were filled with all sorts of exciting people tied to various historical events. But, not everyone has had such experiences. Some have led mundane lives considered very dull. However, that doesn't mean they haven't had something to contribute.

My great-grandfather raised his family in a “soddie” on the vast plains of the Nebraska sand hills. A soddie was a house made of sod.

On the western rolling hills of Nebraska there were no trees, so wood was virtually non-existent.

He didn't live with anything significant to report; but how he lived was of extreme importance to me and my family. Well, there was that reported incident in Indiana where he was accused of stealing a horse—but that's just a family legend.

So why is the “soddie” story important today? Because it's still standing just north of Scottsbluff on a ranch. And the rancher that

owns the property uses it as a winter windbreak for his milk cows.

I've driven by it, but it was at a time of day I didn't think appropriate to knock on the rancher's door. Still, now I wished I had. I'm not sure I could find the place again because my cousin, who told me about it, has long since passed on. Whether he told his daughters about it, I don't know.

There are many reasons an autobiography, or biography, is important. One of the biggest reasons is to give a great deal of assistance to your family genealogist. And, believe me, sooner or later, there'll be at least one in every family. I thought I had that job in my family, but I have at least two cousins who have done far more in tracking our ancestors and their history than I ever thought about. If you decide you want that job, the best place to start, bar none, is the Mormon Internet web site: Ancestry.com.

The Mormon Church has spared no expense in attempting to document nearly every family

in America. It's a mammoth task that keeps on growing. They have literally gone to the extent of drawing out maps for family genealogists to find the site where the bodies are buried.

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How people lived and what was happening in the world around them often is just as important as what they were doing. What sorts of fashions were there? How did people work? What sort of tools did they use?

My great-grandmother did laundry for people in her small town. She used a scrub board and washed everything by hand. Then she used an outdoor clothesline to dry everything on. If it rained, she had to hang everything out again.

When she ironed, she used a set of four heated irons “cooking” on a large range, or cook stove. As the one iron she was using cooled, she put it back on the stove and took another one off and continued her work; just rotating the four on and off the stove.

I think that little piece of information, about a woman who never had much excitement in her life, is, nonetheless, quite interesting to her descendants.

Her husband, my great-grandfather, laid all of the sidewalks in their town where my mother grew up. Many of them are still in use today—more than 100 years later.

It doesn't take much to realize that even a most insignificant event can be important to record.

When my mother was born in May 1911, William Howard Taft was president. My father was born in May 1916, when Woodrow Wilson was president and World War I had been raging for two years. The day I was born, April 11, 1939, Heinrich Himmler was on the cover of Time magazine. If anyone in your family doesn't know who Himmler is, then it makes for a good dig to go back into history and find out who this bum Nazis was.

My life began near the end of the Great Depression. The United States' entrance into

World War II in December 1941 ended the depression and launched the greatest mobilization of military and industrial complexes the world has ever seen. Some 16 million Americans were in uniform and even a greater number of men and women were employed as defense workers building tanks, airplanes, ships, and all sorts of other war materials including guns and ammo.

America and all other nations at war were on rationing. Nearly everything was rationed, from foodstuffs to rubber to gasoline. Ordinary citizens could only buy three gallons of gas per week, unless you were a defense worker. Then you could get up to six gallons per week. That was the difference between an "A" and "B" sticker stuck to the inside of a car's windshield.

Only one new tire was allowed per year. The re-capping of smoothies, otherwise known as worn-out treads, became very popular.

Just the subject of rationing during World War II, as told by those who lived through it,

will be of tremendous interest to your descendants of today.

What was your first automobile? When did you get electricity? Your first telephone? How much did you pay for your first house?

Or, what was rent on your first apartment in your young adult years? What was the price of gasoline, a new car, a loaf of bread? Don't remember? Most of the answers to questions like these and many others are available and there should be someone in your family who can help you fill in the blanks.

I was contacted recently by a long-time friend of mine, who told me something I never knew; and she knew very little about.

Her father was a Navy Corpsman who was with the Marines. He was killed in Korea when she was just four-years old. She knew very little about him and her mother was very quiet.

Now she's on a quest to learn more about him. A fellow Navy Corpsman, who was in

the same outfit as her father, hopefully can help her out. Are you him?

This is a common problem, especially for young adults during the wars. There are literally thousands of widows from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, who have since remarried. Maybe they didn't have children with their first husband, but that doesn't mean her children from a subsequent husband would be interested in what might have been.

When and where did you go to school? Who were your favorite teachers? Were you active in sports, music, and drama? Did you go to college? Where? Finish? What did you study? What years did your education take place.

One of my interview subjects told me he ran away from home in Oklahoma at the age of twelve. It was during the Great Depression; and, with little concern from his parents, it was one less mouth to feed.

He “rode the rails” all the way to Arizona where he found a job as a cowboy. He had

that job until he was fifteen. He then jumped back onto a boxcar and ended up in Oceanside where his brother had an auto repair business.

By the time he was eighteen, he had joined the city's police department. One was supposed to be twenty-one; but, back in those days, nobody bothered to check.

There was the retired Marine general who told me about attaché duty during the late 1930s in Shanghai right before the Japanese invaded China.

Then there was the B-26 pilot who was captured by the Gestapo in Paris during the war and was sent to the infamous death camp at Buchenwald. A German Luftwaffe commandant saved him and 165 other Allied airman from a certain and brutal death. It later became a noted incident in WWII history.

And, then you have a person who won't tell their family anything about their past, but will confide in a buddy. I recently played

taps for a dear friend who was a Navy submariner. However, his daughter never knew his actions during his thirty-one years in the service.

He saw naval combat action in Korea and served two tours of duty in Vietnam. He attained the highest enlisted rank, Master Chief, and was a highly decorated seaman. But how he achieved his rank and his awards and medals will remain with him for eternity.

I heard more of his stories than his family ever did. He was a gentle man who didn't believe his daughter, or her children, needed to hear the burdens of war. Though, he had no problem of relating his service to me—but that's where he drew the line.

Now that I've set the scene and whetted your appetite, you now have plenty of reasons to uncap your pen and jot down the makings of your masterpiece. So let's move onward to the many ways of just how you can achieve it.