

Becoming an oral historian

With the holidays upon us, many of us will have the occasion to spend some time with family members that we may not regularly see. The hectic pace of 21st century life often prevents us from taking the time to REALLY talk with, and to listen to our parents and our grandparents.

In this column, I am urging you to take advantage of those precious opportunities. Become an oral historian. This column could be subtitled, "If I knew then what I know now." Because now I wish I had taken the time to record the recollections of my grandparents when I had the chance.

My maternal grandfather was born in 1898. He was a teenager when the "worst natural disaster ever to hit Ohio," the 1913 flood, occurred. He farmed with horses. He lived through the Great Depression. He and my grandmother lived a rural, frugal and self-sufficient lifestyle that he described to me in vivid detail. But now, my own recollections of his stories are fading, even as I try to pass them on to my children, and to their children. How I wish I had recorded him telling those stories.

That is the essence of what historians these days refer to as oral history interviews, which are now viewed as "primary sources" by historical researchers. Oral history interviews are legitimate historical documents, just like letters, photographs and other primary sources.

Oral history interviews provide us with an insight into just how the well-documented major historical events impacted people on a local and personal level. Sometimes we can learn the histories of minority populations that may only exist in the oral form. Or we may learn about aspects of our culture that are completely neglected by the more traditional history books.

One great advantage we now have in documenting these oral history interviews is improved technology. Digital audio recording technology is now affordable, delivers high quality, and is simple to operate. Contrasted with reel-to-reel tapes or cassettes, digital recorders are a giant leap forward.

A professional quality digital recorder can be purchased for under \$100 at most electronics stores. There are digital "voice recorders" on the market for under \$50, though you may find that they are limited in their functionality. But with a little shopping, you should find a recorder that will meet your needs and your budget.

With your recorder in hand, find a quiet corner amidst the holiday hustle. Then all you have to do is lead your "interviewee" through some guided reminiscing. You might want to have your questions in mind, or even written down.

"Tell me how you celebrated Christmas as a child."

“What did you do for fun when you were a teenager?”

“Tell me about your first job.” Or, first date, or first car, or first...

You may do nothing more than just store those recordings away for a later date. But I am sure someday you will be glad you took the time to have that conversation.

To learn more about becoming an oral historian visit: www.dohistory.org, or www.oralhistory.org.