

## Shopping Around

**Making History** | Personal historians document family stories so that future generations can remember them. | *By Rachel Trachten*

East Bay resident Marjorie Wilkes treasures stories from “Mama,” her 94-year-old grandmother: how Mama’s great-great-grandparents committed suicide because they feared the South would win the Civil War; how her great-grandparents were then taken from the Southern plantation to be raised by the Creek tribe in Oklahoma, creating a family that is now part African American, part Native American and part Caucasian.

“I wanted to capture these stories on film so that future generations will know what Mama sounded like, what her gestures and laughter were like,” explains Wilkes.

So Wilkes gathered eight female relatives spanning four generations and enlisted the help of videographer Lis Cox, founder of Alameda-based Talking Story, to create a video about Mama’s life that will forever preserve her family history and critical moments in U.S. history as well.

Two modern realities—an aging population and the fact that multiple generations no longer live under the same roof—have inspired a nationwide boom in the business of personal histories. Membership in the Association of Personal Historians has increased by more than 20 percent annually for the past five years. The organization, which represents just a fraction of the professionals involved in creating personal histories in the form of books, audiotapes, DVDs and Web sites, currently has more than 600 members, including 70 in Northern California.

“It’s not simply a need to transmit information,” says Jurgen Mollers, founder and president of San Francisco-based Storyzon. “A central motivation in creating a personal history is the wish to forge a loving connection with family members.”

Fostering a link among the generations in her family motivated Gloria Brown Brobeck to put her story down “in black and white.” An 86-year-old artist who raised her children in Orinda and now



Passing history lessons: Personal historian Jurgen Mollers interviews Louise Quao for a follow-up book to her family history—a book about overcoming alcoholism that she hopes will help others. Photo by Lori Eanes.

lives in San Francisco, Brobeck realized during a holiday gathering that the younger members of her large family weren't aware of their unique history. "For example," she explains, "my 18-year-old nephew didn't know that all of my siblings were born in Hong Kong as British subjects."

Brobeck created her printed memoir with the help of personal historian Trena Cleland of Berkeley. Working collaboratively, they integrated Brobeck's writings with Cleland's interviews of her, and pored over old photos to match them to the text. When the book was complete, Brobeck threw a book-signing party for family and friends.

### Historians' inspiration

Many personal historians—who come from fields like journalism, broadcasting, social work, hospice care and teaching—view their work as an extension of their past experience. In Cleland's case, a youthful hobby pointed the way toward her future career. At age 10, she created her own neighborhood newspaper about the lives of the families living within a few blocks of her Wilmette, Ill., home. "Even then," says Cleland, "I could see that each person's life was unique, interesting, and worth recording."

In her youth, Cleland relied on her mother to type her stories and make duplicates with carbon paper. Today, she chronicles the lives of seemingly ordinary people through her company, First Person Narratives. Since 1998, she has been creating heirloom-quality memoirs to be read, enjoyed, and passed down to future generations. Most of her projects incorporate an individual's own reminiscences, family heritage and photos in an archival-quality book.

"A memoir is a great way for people to review and reflect on their pasts, to share their family history, and to pass on their values and wisdom," Cleland says.

Like Cleland, videographer Cox became a personal historian before she even knew the term. "Both of my parents died at age 65, somewhat unexpectedly," she explains. "I come from a family of Southern storytellers, and I so regretted that no one had captured my parents' words on film."

Shortly after her parents' deaths, Cox bought a video camera and filmed a conversation with a family friend who was suffering from emphysema. The friend died a few months after the video was taken, and a year later, Cox sent the tape to the woman's three grown daughters. "They were so moved to hear her hearty laugh, to watch her pour tea, and to see the way she wore her hair," Cox says. She began to take classes in videography and to create videos for friends and family.

The process of making personal history videos has mirrored Cox's own maturation. "I started when I was in my mid-40s and feeling a lot of yearning for my parents; I'm now a young senior myself and starting to understand the life phase that many of my clients are in.



Stories with style: Graphic artists create custom covers and design pages with text and photos for pleasing results. Book Design by Andreas Jones, [www.storyzon.com](http://www.storyzon.com).

## By the Book

### PERSONAL HISTORIANS

Cathy Cade, (510) 251-2774;  
[www.CathyCade.com](http://www.CathyCade.com).

First Person Narratives (Trena Cleland),  
(510) 524-7224; [www.trenacleland.com](http://www.trenacleland.com).

History in Progress (Elizabeth A. Wright),

I understand the desire to document one's own life, and I appreciate the opportunity to look both forward and back."

Many of Cox's clients are adults who want to honor the lives of their parents or grandparents. Sometimes an unexpected illness brings an urgent wish to create a lasting memory for children or other loved ones. Filming may take place in one day, or, if the client is ill, several shorter sessions may be necessary.

### Surprising Stories

For William and Malvina Pasquinelli, creating a video provided a chance to tell some of the stories that lie behind their old family photos. Their film includes the tale of Pasquinelli's harrowing journey to Ellis Island when he was a toddler, as well as stories of life as first-generation Italian-Americans in San Francisco's North Beach. The couple's grandchildren, who were included in the video, were amazed to learn that after finishing high school, their grandfather had earned just one dollar per day as a garage mechanic.

Like Pasquinelli's grandchildren, family members often discover surprising facts while creating a personal history. Oakland-based historian Linda Hamilton recalls the story of a 92-year-old man who grew up in the poor hills of South Pittsburgh. As a boy, this man lived in extreme poverty in an area with only dirt streets. When he was 13 and his family's situation improved, they moved into town where the streets were paved. For the first time in his life, this boy bounced a ball. "No one in his family knew this story," Hamilton recalls. "Imagine how meaningful it could be for his grandchildren, who take such things for granted."

As founder of the company Stories to Last, Hamilton not only writes individual biographies, but creates organizational histories as well. She's currently at work on a book marking the Oakland Rotary's 100th anniversary, in which she weaves the story of the Rotarians with information about the city's history. For a business or nonprofit, such a document offers a wealth of practical uses: it can strengthen efforts in marketing, public relations, fund-raising, and recruiting, and can boost staff and volunteer morale. In creating an organizational narrative, Hamilton conveys not only facts and accomplishments, but an agency's culture as well. And whether she's writing about a huge institution or just one person, Hamilton relies on her love of storytelling. "One of my goals," she notes, "is to make history accessible."

### Following the Scents

Personal historians are coming up with innovative ways to create this accessibility. At Storyzon, a team of historians, editors, and researchers produce not only traditional histories, but two other kinds of documents as well—the culinary biography and the legacy letter.

To create a culinary history, families compile favorite recipes along with stories about special dishes or mealtime traditions. "Food is a

(415) 928-3417,  
Elizabeth@HistoryInProgress.com.

LTR Productions (Leslie Rupley), (925) 934-8307; [www.preserving-personal-histories.com](http://www.preserving-personal-histories.com).

Memoria (Lauren Dunbar), (925) 253-1999; [ladunbar@pobox.com](mailto:ladunbar@pobox.com).

Paintbox Family (Susan M. Davis), (510) 839-7229;  
[www.paintboxproductions.com](http://www.paintboxproductions.com).

Stories to Last (Linda A. Hamilton), (510) 301-1997;  
[www.StoriestoLast.com](http://www.StoriestoLast.com).

Storyzon, LLC (Jurgen Mollers), (415) 637-7662; [www.storyzon.com](http://www.storyzon.com).

Story Lines (Esther Ehrlich), (510) 849-1002; [www.storylineshistories.com](http://www.storylineshistories.com).

Talking Story (Lis Cox), (510) 814-3721;  
[www.talkingstory.com](http://www.talkingstory.com).

Uniquely Perfect (Angela Beth Zusman), (510) 295-7906;  
[www.uniquelyperfect.com](http://www.uniquelyperfect.com).

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Association of Personal Historians:  
[www.personalhistorians.org](http://www.personalhistorians.org).

From APH's home page, you can link to sites with more information about oral histories, scrapbooking, genealogy and related fields.

International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review:  
[www.reminiscenceandlifereview.org](http://www.reminiscenceandlifereview.org).

wonderful mirror of the culture,” Mollers says. “And the memories are so deeply ingrained; for many people, the earliest memories are of a particular food or aroma.”

Stories about food can take many directions and may include tales of learning to cook, details of holiday celebrations or even reminiscences of long-ago fishing trips. The culinary biography is typically shorter and therefore less costly than a traditional history and also allows many relatives to share their stories.

In a legacy letter, which runs about 10 pages, a person sets out values or advice for children or other family members. Mollers notes that these letters are always emotionally charged. “I have not done a single legacy letter where the client wouldn’t sooner or later start crying, particularly while paying tribute to those who shaped his or her life in a positive way,” he says. These letters may be shared while the author is still alive or may be passed along in a will. For some people, a legacy letter offers the chance to speak directly to a loved one; others write such letters to correct misperceptions about their lives.

### How to Begin

To begin a personal history, clients typically consider a list of questions about their heritage, their own life path, and their values and wishes. Families evaluate what they do and don’t want to include and frequently change their minds during the process. Clients have the option of self-editing, so that their story is preserved in a way that feels right and comfortable.

Because personal history is a labor-intensive field—involving hours of interviewing, transcribing, editing, revising and preparing for publication or broadcast, the fees for services can range from several hundred to \$15,000 or more. The cost depends on the length and complexity of a project.

Recognizing that costs may be prohibitive, many personal historians offer a range of options, and some incorporate volunteer work into their businesses. Cleland, for example, volunteered her time collecting oral histories from 12 formerly homeless seniors at Oakland’s St. Mary’s Center. Mollers is trying to partner with an existing nonprofit to create a way for wealthier clients to subsidize books for those with limited resources.

Cleland, a coordinator of the Northern California chapter of the Association of Personal Historians, is organizing an upcoming Personal History Town Square to showcase and promote the work of Association members. This free event, part of a larger conference of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review, takes place Thursday, Nov. 15, 3-5:30 p.m. at San Francisco’s Hotel Whitcomb. Personal historians will be on hand to show their sample books, play their DVDs, and talk informally with attendees.

Among the Town Square presentations will be a memorable exhibit that employs personal history as an avenue toward social change. The Lavender Scrolls Project portrays the lives of eight lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender elders. It features photographs, life-story excerpts and quotations that defy stereotypes about being old and gay, while also demonstrating the realities common to all elders. The project, presented by Oakland personal historian Cathy Cade, seeks to promote understanding and support within and across sexual orientations.

Reminiscence offers powerful rewards for all involved in the process. Ida Oberman, who conducts interviews for Talking Story, notes, "One of my discoveries in creating personal histories is that everybody has a story to tell. It's wonderful to help people realize that their life story is worth cherishing and preserving."

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