

## A Precious Legacy: Capturing Your Chapter History (Reviewed May, 2006)

We've all listened to the stories told over and over by our parents – how they met, how they felt when their first child was born, what it was like to be a kid. These are important memories, important to our own sense of self worth and belonging. But, there are also the stories, the “family history”, if you will, of our P.E.O. chapters that need to be told and saved for those who follow us.

Memories are fragile things. They are easily lost when sisters pass on to Chapter Eternal, or demit to a different chapter, or move to a new community. Recording those memories on audio or video tape in advance of these losses is an important part of preserving the traditions of P.E.O. and strengthening the connectedness we all feel as P.E.O.s. The process of capturing these memories takes time, equipment, and knowledge. The purpose of this handout is to give you enough ideas and information to get you started.

WHO: Include all members of your chapter in this project. Trade off the roles of interviewer and narrator. Include the charter members of your chapter, the 50 year members of P.E.O., the 10 year members, and the woman you initiated yesterday. All have valuable stories to tell. All can contribute to our “family” history. There may be reluctance on the part of some to be interviewed (“my memories are too trivial for all this fuss”); remind them that each sister is important, that the more stories you have, the clearer the picture becomes, and this is an excellent way to get to know each other better and to have fun. (By the way, you probably need to set up a committee to coordinate the project...)

WHAT: Before any interviews take place, decide what it is what you want to know. Of course, you are interested in the narrator's involvement in P.E.O. and you might ask questions like these: How did you feel when you learned the true meaning of our letters? Remember special events and excursions as a chapter, your involvement in conventions and committees, the glow in the eyes of a scholarship recipient, the first meeting you served as president, the excitement of organizing a new chapter, the meaning of P.E.O. in your life? However, your interest should extend past P.E.O. and include questions about the person who became a P.E.O. because it is her personality, family influences, ethics and upbringing that brought her to the Sisterhood to begin with. There are books full of questions to be used in collecting family history. Use canned lists as a guide and come up with your own list of appropriate questions. You might include questions about special events in her life, a typical Sunday, childhood vacations/school experiences, parents/siblings/extended family, religious training and influences, hairstyles, fads, music, favorite books, pets, world events and how they affected her life, career experiences, romances, her wedding day, children, grandchildren, times of disappointment, loneliness, grief, times of joy, views of child rearing/discipline/the world today, generation gap, personal philosophy/values, and so forth. Consider in your own heart what influences are at work in your own life and let these thoughts guide your questions.

HOW: There are several steps to making each interview a success:

1. Set up a time and place for the interview. Choose a time convenient to the narrator, a time when the narrator is most alert and talkative. Choose a location that is quiet (no TV, no children in the next room, no refrigerator hum, etc.) and familiar and comfortable to the narrator,

preferably her own home. Be sure to give both interviewer and narrator time to prepare. Think about interviewing two or three close friends at the same time: their shared memories should provide depth and fun to the experience.

2. Interviewer: Prepare the questions to guide the interview. Write down everything you already know about the narrator. Do research on the time period to be covered and look through the chapter scrapbooks to get ideas and background. (You do have chapter scrapbooks...?)

3. Interviewer: Select the equipment you will use to record the interview (more about equipment later) and practice with it until you are sure that you can work it efficiently and unobtrusively. Be sure to have extra batteries, if needed, several spare cassettes, and an extension cord with you. It would be helpful, especially if video is used, to have another sister at the interview to operate the equipment so that you can concentrate on the narrator.

4. Narrator: In preparation for the interview, search your memory for interesting stories. Look at photographs, memorabilia such as ticket stubs, postcards, programs, diaries, and flowers you pressed in the pages of your favorite book. Books of pictures from the time period to be discussed, such as the Depression or the Sixties, can be good memory joggers.

5. Interviewer: The big day arrives. Bring flowers or cookies to break the ice. Set up your equipment and let it run for a few minutes while you chat informally. Play the tape back so the narrator can hear/see herself and to make sure the equipment is working properly. Then begin the interview. Always announce your name, the narrator's name, the date and location of the interview on tape. Always make a written label with the same information for each tape you use. Try to keep each session to 60-90 minutes. Be aware of when you or the narrator is getting tired; stop the interview and set up another time. Practice good listening skills and use cues from one story to lead to another; try to stick with your prearranged list of questions, but trust your instincts about what will make the interview interesting and valuable. Ask leading, open-ended questions. And don't be afraid to ask for the information you want.

6. Equipment: (a.) Audio-tape requires a tape recorder (not just a "player"), a good mike, and several cassette tapes. The recorder does not need to be a fancy model, but it does need to accommodate an external mike. Use a "multidirectional" mike so the speaker does not need to speak directly into it. It can be handheld and moved from one speaker to the other by the interviewer, or set on a table nearby. The best option is a lapel mike which is less obvious and may be easier to get used to. (b.) Video-tape requires a camcorder, a good mike (see above), and several cassettes. An extra flood light may be needed if the natural lighting comes from behind participants; watch for dark shadows on faces and adjust lighting. Try to have someone else run the camera so that the shots can be varied from one angle to another, zoomed in for close-ups or changes to include the interviewer. Otherwise, use a tripod. Remember that full face shots are difficult for an untrained speaker and profile shots are not always the most flattering. Try for an angle shot. (c.) Make copies at regular speed, not high speed, for best results.

7. When: Do it now! It may be too late next month or next year to capture memories of a lifetime of sisterly love.

Compiled by Margery Smith  
Chapter EK, Littleton  
On behalf of the Colorado State History Committee  
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For CSC History Display

A Precious Legacy: Bibliography

Your public library will be able to provide you with books and other materials on the subject “oral biography”, either from the library’s own collection or through interlibrary loan. Here are a few titles to ask for:

Akeret, Robert U. Family tales, family wisdom: How to gather the stories of a lifetime and share them with your family. New York: Wm. Morrow, 1991. Offers basis for storytelling from other cultures; suggests resources and tools to trigger stories; outlines a 10 step program, a framework to carry out your program; readable, evocative, inspiring, good ideas.

Fletcher, William. Recording your family history: A guide to preserving oral history with videotape, audiotape, suggested topics and questions, interviewing techniques. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1986. Brief overview of techniques and literally hundreds of questions that could be asked during interviews.

Rosenbluth, Vera. Keeping family stories alive: A creative guide to taping your family life and lore. Point Roberts, WA: Hartley & Marks, 1990. Excellent advise on equipment, interview techniques, rationale for recording oral history and how to get the best interviews possible.

Zimmerman, William. How to tape instant oral biographies: How to tape record, video or film your life stories. New York: Guarionex Press, 1988. Short, valuable outline of techniques, questions. Includes worksheets to record family data.

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