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I DON'T KNOW ENOUGH

Types of Local History Resources

Gerry Stoner

My friends and acquaintances—and this includes you—go to talks and presentations on local history, and so I am continually surprised when this circle of friends—and this still includes you—says that they don't know enough about local history to be able to retell it.

In part, you may be right—you may not yet have the insights and knowledge to write a great American history right off the top, but you can access people, documents, pictures, and artifacts that tell great stories.

Objective: *Develop a catalog of people and items that would interest other like-minded people.*

You can easily make a list of people who have lived local history, and you can also list documents, pictures, and artifacts that you know about and can access.

People:

Your most useful resource for local history will be the seniors and county, town, and village historians of your area—they have lived and recorded events in the town and may have artifacts, clippings, and stories dating back the 70–80 years of their own lives, and an additional 20–50 years from their parents and grandparents. Friends of mine in their eighties have great memories, can recount details from three generations that go back about 100 years, and have contributed to at least 20 articles in the last 10 issues of the Newsletter.

Start an address book for these people—I use a database (many use Excel spreadsheets) to keep track of my work on local history. The integrating power of the computer is awesome, but you may feel more comfortable with Excel spreadsheets, index cards (use big ones), or 8 1/2-by-11 paper. Use what is comfortable and will help you to organize your thoughts.

Interviewing a parent or grandparent creates a wondrous win-win partnership—the younger partner learns about familial roots and an earlier time in their history, while the older partner has an opportunity to pass on fundamental values of the culture.

A friend of mine is writing her own memoir of recollections and including pictures of her parents, friends, and relatives. Her brother has undertaken the same exercise and they are amazed at how these two works on the same topic vary and enrich their lives!

Documents:

Documents provide another fertile area of exploration— from family Bibles to scraps of paper, diaries, letters, pamphlets, and registers— basically, anything that is printed, typed, or written.

Some documents have the great additional benefit that they can be republished with minimal effort on your part. Bob Morrissey has letters from the Civil War: he wrote a short note on the provenance of these letters and transcribed their contents for the Newsletter. Voila! Bob has five articles for newsletters or websites.

The major drawback to documents: people forget they are in the attic while mice remember their location exactly. Protect them!

Pictures:

Original photographs of locally important people, places, and activities are worth more than the proverbial thousand words, and they have amazing detail. “Digitizing” them with a good scanner and computer restores detail for future generations.

Printed pictures published in magazines, books, or postcards don’t have nearly the detail that original photographs do, and digitizing them may introduce moiré patterns as a result of the original printing process. Nevertheless, it is essential that all pictures be digitized!

If you have a trove of pictures that are indeed of interest, contact the historical society or library nearest to where the pictures were taken and ask them to scan the pictures. You can retain the original, but allowing the library/society to retain electronic files insures you against future loss. You can also take the files to a photo service and make new “originals” for your friends and relatives.

Artifacts:

Yankee Magazine had a long-running artifacts feature in which an item would be photographed with the caption “What is it?” A functional equivalent for the Catskills could include coverage of artifacts ranging from the Gilboa fossils of 3.5 million years ago to nineteenth-century doohickeys, whatchamacallits, and gilgoys.

Take pictures of these items and record as much information as possible about their history and use. If you have questions about the item, send copies of the pictures and provenance to your historical society, library, or www.northerncatskillshistory.com and ask these organizations to fill in the blanks.



This article is one of several to help you document local history. Other articles will help you convert your interviews, documents, pictures, and artifacts into documentation of your local history that can be shared with your community.

Analyzing Your Own Resources

Organizing your information

Organizing the people of your area

Organizing the documents of your area

Organizing the pictures of your area

Organizing the artifacts of your area

Creating Your Own Local History

Developing documentation from your resources

Genealogical work

Validating local history

Presenting and publishing local history

Courses and Support

Assignment: Most historical societies close down for the winter, and non-migratory neighbors tend to fight cabin fever by going to the Saturday or Sunday afternoon movies in Hunter, at the Power Authority, or another venue. While these may be fun, I hope you set up this alternative: host a series of workshops using this article as a focus and start to document your own local history.

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