

Audio Memories

by David Boeve

Is a picture really worth 1000 words? How many words is that unidentified photo worth that you found in Grandma's dresser after she was gone? Who were those people? Why did Grandma have that photo? What was Grandma's biggest disappointment in life? How did she meet your grandpa? How valuable would those unidentified photos be if you had a recording of Grandma talking about each photo? Why do we have so many photos and so few recordings of our family sharing their stories?

My father-in-law has a 40-year-old reel-to-reel recording of his parents wishing him well when he was in the Army. But he doesn't have a recording of them talking about their lives. We've had the technology to record our parents' voices for over 50 years—first with reel-to-reel, then 8-track, analog cassette, digital cassette, and now direct to digital with compact disks and mp3 files. Even with this technology, we're failing to preserve the oral stories of World War II veterans who are dying at a rate of 1,200 per day.

My first oral history interview was recorded in 1991 with my grandmother. This project, assigned by my high school history teacher, Mrs. Joanne Theron, provided not only an insight into my grandma's youth, but also provided a cherished memory ten years after my grandma passed away. In October 2006, I was cleaning my basement when I found a cassette within a box of stuff from high school. That cassette contained the interview from 15 years earlier. For almost an hour and a half, I sat listening to my grandma's voice sharing stories of her youth. She talked about how a local boy threatened her teacher with a knife in the two-room schoolhouse in Drenthe, Michigan. Grandma shared how her dad was intrigued by the steel workers throwing red hot rivets while building the Warm Friend Tavern in Holland, Michigan. She talked about how pale Grandpa's face turned when he learned the tornado had ripped off half the barn roof in 1956. I wouldn't have known any of these stories had Mrs. Theron not assigned the project back in 1991.

Sometimes it's just a simple sound that transports us back to a moment in time. That interview was recorded in my grandma's kitchen. The clock in her living room chimed several times while we were talking. Now, when I close my eyes while hearing the clock chime behind Grandma's voice, I feel like I'm right back in Grandma's kitchen. If sound has such a powerful effect on our memory, why don't we put as much energy into collecting and preserving sound and stories as we put into collecting and preserving photos?

Our lives are filled with memories attached to sound. Sounds that mean nothing to someone else may bring you back to a specific time or place. The first tractor my father bought was a 1963 IH Farmall 504. We used this tractor almost every day on our small dairy farm while I was growing up. The sound of the brake pedal recoiling against its metal stop brings me right back to all the summer days baling hay and all the Spring Breaks cleaning cow pens. Hearing a train horn at a street crossing reminds me of two things: my freshman year on campus at Hope College, and Jen Pelon, the 80-year-old lady who lived across the corner from my boyhood home. Jen would predict rain based on how loud the train horn could be heard on her farm, two miles from the Holland–Chicago track. As this train horn demonstrates, oftentimes a sound will remind us of people, as well as locations.

My family has piles of pictures of my grandparents. But even with the availability of audio technology for the past 50 years, I only have one recording of her voice, sharing her stories, telling about her life. These are stories that I had never heard before that interview in 1991. These stories make up the history of our family. Thanks to that interview, my children can hear these stories in my grandma's own voice, even though she had passed away before any of them were born. How many stories will you be able to share with your children after your parents or grandparents are gone?

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From the Director



This issue marks the beginning of my 11th year at the Joint Archives of Holland and one that promises to be as busy as the past ten. Oh, how the time flies when you get to go work five days a week at a place where you love to be.

A new book about one of Holland's personalities has been published. This is the latest book written by Donald van Reken and Fritz L. Kliphuis titled *Reindeer Edward Werkman: The Gilded Hollander*. As described on the title page, "This biography is based on documented facts about R. E. Werkman's life as gathered from many sources. Local and contemporary facts are also included. A letter format has been used to create separate sequential segments of his life and activities." Contact Readers' World in Holland or the authors for a copy of this good read.

The story in this issue concerns oral history in the Holland area and a new approach being taken by David Boeve. I found Boeve's approach to oral history innovative and exciting for those of us who seek a more proactive attitude in recording our ancestors before it is too late. Contact information for Boeve can be found at the end of the story.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

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Listening to this recording, I realized that everyone should be able to share their family stories with future generations. It's actually quite easy to record and preserve your important life stories. You really only need three things: something to record with, a comfortable place to sit, and some questions to start the conversation. From a \$15 Sony cassette recorder, to an iPod with a microphone, to the personal computer, to the direct-to-CD digital recorder, all can be used to record the human voice. Our houses are full of comfortable places to sit; I like the kitchen table. The hard surface might not be quite as acoustically friendly as the living room sofa, but it's where I remember having the important conversations growing up. But sit where your storyteller is comfortable. Once you're comfortable, start asking questions. Ask what you're curious about. Don't worry about whether you're asking the "right" questions. Just ask the questions you want to know about. Those will be the "right" questions 15 years from now when you're listening to the recording.

Here are some examples of responses that I have heard during recent conversations:

From playing baseball as a kid with her husband, to a family cross-country vacation in a 1951 school bus, Millie's 84 years of experience allows her to share some amazing stories.

"What was the happiest moment of your life?" *"The time I gave my heart to the Lord. That was quite an experience. I was ironing clothes for my mother at the ironing board in the kitchen and my sister Janet came in the room and said to me: 'Millie, you really should give your heart to the Lord.' I had been thinking about this for a long, long time. And I really wanted to, but I kept putting it off and was kind of afraid to go before the consistory and all those men there, you know, it was one of the drawbacks. Anyway, when Janet said that to me, I went up to my room and I got down on my knees and I asked the Lord to come into my heart. At that moment I could feel His presence in the room and I could hear the angels' wings in my bedroom. This is the real thing for sure. It just stirred me to no end. To this day it still gives me goose bumps because I can remember it exactly as it happened. It was just so spectacular. I'm sure everybody doesn't get an experience like that, but I was so thankful that I did."*

"How old were you?" *"Seventeen."*

While Millie was learning to trust in God, Frank was learning an entirely different lesson about trust. A split second decision by a new guard at his army base in Germany during World War II taught Frank a vivid lesson about who not to trust.

"I remember one time we were in our company area there, it was in that Hertgen Forest. I remember that. We had passwords. [Anytime a vehicle came, a guy on guard would] stop that vehicle and ask for the password and they'd give it to him. If they couldn't give it to him, he'd cut loose on them or capture them or whatever he could do. One kid was a green kid there and a jeep pulled up with a colonel in it and a driver and he said 'what's the password?' The colonel said: 'Password, hell! Where's Colonel Wilinghelm?' Which was our regimental commander and the kid said: 'Right over there at Head Quarters'. So [the jeep] drove over there and threw a bunch of hand grenades in there



and blew 'em up. That was where we really learned you don't trust nobody. They had American uniforms on. They had an American Jeep. Looked just like the rest of us and talked just like us. That's the way it went."

Recollections about wartime events don't focus solely on mistrust and carnage. Sometimes they even result in love. Consider the following story about how Don met his wife, Dorothy:

How did you meet your wife? *"On a Greyhound bus. She threw paper wads at me. I was sleeping. She took advantage of me really. I was coming back from Korea and there was six or seven of us that came back together from the same outfit and we'd be partying a bit along the way in San Francisco and places like that so we were all on the bus headed east and my wife got on in Omaha, Nebraska. I saw her get on but I didn't pay no attention. Just another girl getting on the bus. By the time we got to Chicago, instead of going home to Michigan, I got another ticket to ride with her to Canton, Ohio. For some reason I followed her there."*

Did she invite you along? *"Well, I don't think she had anything to do with it I just did it. I was determined. I think we were both determined. We got off the bus, went to her house, met her family, and got married three days later. That was 54 years ago."*

Most churches ask all their members to come in for photos in order to create a church photo directory every few years. Again, we produce a pile of pictures with no stories. What if every church had a 60 minute interview with every member over 70-years-old? What kind of stories would we hear? We'd hear how an 85-year-old member reacted when her husband was killed in an auto accident 40 years earlier.

"For many, many months I would say: 'God, you took him, but you can bring him back. God, you took him, but you can bring him back.' I was angry with God, I was very angry with God, and then one night the door opened in my bedroom, and the person of Dad - I think it was an angel - said: 'Now this is enough' and it was Dad - I suppose it was a dream, whatever - but then I could handle it."

These particular stories were known to the families of the storytellers, but the families still appreciate having a recording of the stories being shared in their parent's voice. However, just a 60 minute conversation uncovered multiple stories unknown to family members.

What if I hadn't rummaged through that old box of stuff in 2006? That 16-year-old recording of my grandmother's childhood would still be sitting in a box waiting to be unknowingly thrown away. For that reason, if you're going to go through the effort of recording your family's stories, take the final step of selecting a permanent repository for your conversation. At minimum, this should be a fireproof safe where you keep your will and estate papers. It could also be a local museum, library, or historical society. An archive facility, like the Joint Archives of Holland, is a great choice for several reasons. First, the staff of a professional archive understands media storage and historical significance. Second, the systems are established to control release of information. Through an organized archive, information is accessible to researchers and future family members. Also, in the event of sensitive information, restrictions can even be placed on the release of information. A recent example of this is the newly published Gerald R Ford memoir. Family stories are about identity and legacy. Choose a repository that will support your legacy.

Oral history conversations don't have to be held exclusively to senior citizens. Graduations and weddings are also great times to record family stories. What better time for a couple to reflect on how they met than while they plan their wedding? As a child, mom and dad would record my brother, sister, and me reading, making up stories, and even playing a card game called "Pit." Now those recordings are enjoyed as much as our baby books! My kids think it's especially funny to listen to me talk when I was their age.

Preserving life stories shouldn't be overwhelming. The experience of sitting down with someone and sharing memories should be enjoyable. Whether you are listening to your 95-year-old grandmother share about raising seven boys, or your 18-year-old college student reflect on his college selection process, focus on understanding the person, who they are, and how they have experienced life. Even accidental oral histories will be appreciated by future generations and enjoyed by family members some day. Grab a recorder, meet a friend, and start talking!

About the author: David Boeve is founding director of Audio Memories, which focuses on connecting generations by sharing stories. From collecting stories of 1000 people over the age of 70 within the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches for the 1000 Voice Project to recording and submitting wartime stories for the Veterans History Project, Audio Memories believes everybody has a story worth sharing. Additional information about Audio Memories and the 1000 Voices project is available at www.AudioMemories.org.



Elton Bruins (left) being interviewed by Joint Archives of Holland director, Geoffrey Reynolds, in 2008.