

Creating Family Archives

by Phyllis Meshel Onest

Recently I was making plans to travel by airplane to the greater Chicago area for a parish workshop (i.e. Church School staff, Parents, Sunday congregation). At the same time the media was focused on a recent plane crash near Detroit. It was a commuter flight, like the ones I usually use when I travel to the eastern part of the Pittsburgh Diocese. This time I would be on a Boeing 737, so cold weather and ice would not affect this plane as it does for the smaller, commuter planes. Whew! That was one less thing to worry about.

In any case, I decided not to put off finishing my daughters' "Memory Books" any longer. When Michelle graduated from high school in June, I had only completed Volume I: "The Preschool Days Through Middle School." At her graduation party it laid there on the table with lots of disorganized high school memorabilia! The recovering perfectionist within me winced at the sight of plans gone amiss.

I had a few days before I would leave. My resource display had already been shipped by UPS, my presentations were almost ready, the laundry was done, so I had no excuse. The "Memory Books" had to be done. What if I didn't make it back? Maria wouldn't have any "Memory Books" for her graduation in two years! Who would know what to do with all the art work, original stories, class pictures, and all those certificates?

I compulsively took on the task and it was done before I left! Fortunately all the pertinent materials had been somewhat kept together. All I had to do was separate what was Michelle's and what was Maria's, put it in chronological order within each grade level, and integrate class pictures. Plastic sheet protectors made the job go faster. I only had to slide the hundred plus certificates into the clear pages, rather than cut them to fit the photo albums 'peel back' plastic sheets. Since the albums had three-ring binders, the sheet protectors were easily positioned into the chronological order. I was "on a roll." I even organized all the old family pictures into one album that we had inherited four years ago when Jim's mother died!

Before I left five large photo albums chronologically filled with family info were stacked on the stereo speaker, waiting to be positioned in a "place of honor" when the next project was completed - the family room book shelves.

In the book **52 Simple Ways to Build Family Traditions** Paul and Leisa Thigpen [Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1993] have entitled #36, "Create Family Archives." They offer a variety of suggestions that I would like to include.

"Families who want to leave a lasting record of their life together can create their own archives. Organize a designated file drawer, cabinet, or shelf space to hold the relevant materials according to the categories most meaningful to you. Preserve documents in file folders, boxes, scrapbooks,

manila envelopes, albums, or periodical containers."

Your materials can be divided into [1] records from earlier generations and [2] your family's records. Items that can be included in category one are those from your parents and their ancestors: photos, birth and baptismal records, death certificates, legal and financial records, correspondence, naturalization papers, passports, education certificates, as well as anything else that you find interesting. Category two should contain the types of memorabilia that families usually keep in scrapbooks: photos, especially school pictures, birth and death announcements, children's original works, both written and art, school report cards, graduation certificates, and much more.

Depending on the amount of space you have or want to use, you can subdivide the above categories "according to the type of document or according to the subject matter. Types of documents might include these:

- Photos
- Standard-sized (8.5"x11") printed, typed, or handwritten materials
- Irregular-sized printed or handwritten materials
- Newspaper and magazine clippings
- Journals and diaries
- Audiocassettes, videocassettes, and home movies"

If you choose to group materials by subject matter more space is needed. Suggested categories include:

- **"People** Create one file for each person. In this system, for example, you place your grandfather's journal, portrait, and correspondence in a single box or file while your child's report cards, artwork, and birthday party invitation fill another.
- **Correspondence** Arrange letters either chronologically or by recipient.
- **Legal records** File birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, and business documents together.
- **Artistic creations and performances** Include drawings, original poetry, and videotapes of plays or concerts in this group.
- **Birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays** Create a file or box devoted to memorabilia from celebrations of each occasion."

Other basic guidelines include [1] storing materials [a] out of direct sunlight, [b] where the temperature doesn't have extremes, [c] away from possible water leaks or infiltration by pests, [2]

handling them with clean hands, and [3] away from food and drink.

Although archives may seem to be a big project, it doesn't have to be done all at once. One file or box can be completed at a time. When new materials surface, place them in a large box and sort when you have time, rather, when you make some time. For example, I began collecting when the girls were first born by just placing cards in a box. When they began preschool, another box was begun. Be sure to date anything that is placed in a box! I spent needless time doing this recently. When Michelle entered Middle School I began placing items in a large three-ring photo album. Had I kept up with it when she entered High School, I would have had both of her "Memory Books" ready for her graduation party. That could be your goal. It's mine for Maria.

I also have purchased a clothbound book entitled "Our Family History" which has pages devoted to family trees, weddings, births, divorces, vacations, cars, residences, etc. With the passing of the remaining grandparent in our family, I want to record all that I can before I forget. I'm glad I began "Our Family History" while my mother was alive because I was able to ask her the names of her grandparents and aunts and uncles who are long-dead in Crete.

My Uncle Harry has done a lot of compiling of Dad's side of the family, and has told us lots of stories about their parents trek to America, entering through New Jersey, rather than Ellis Island because they had more money. Years ago he had copy negatives made of old photographs for all 12 grandchildren: Papou's [Grandfather's] shoe repair shop, their few family pictures, and pictures of Yiayia [Grandmother] Rubeni, her sister and father taken before 1916. Many of them decorate the cousins' walls. With the onset of color laser photocopying, old pictures can be reproduced at Kinko's for a modest price. Sharp copies of Jim's parents sole wedding picture were quickly made for all those who wanted it after the death of his mother. They proudly hang on walls in three households.

Consider what you would like to hand down to your children and grandchildren, then begin collecting and making copies of photos and documents, and interviewing family members. A little organization goes a long way for this project. In developing family archives we give a gift that will continue to give to future generations.

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