

Remember Me: Lifestreaming and the Modern Genealogist

Thomas MacEntee, of Abundant Genealogy

<http://abundantgenealogy.com>

abundantgenealogy@gmail.com

The old phrase “The cobbler’s children always have the worse shoes,” rings true for genealogists and family historians when it comes to documenting our own lives. With a constant emphasis on preserving the memories of our ancestors, are we “walking the walk” when it comes to our own lives?

There has never been a better time for genealogists and family historians to embrace a new storytelling format: lifestreaming. From online diary apps to narrative “wearable” cameras, the technology now available to capture one’s life is amazing. With new ways to tell our own stories, do you have a plan to leave your own legacy?

Introduction: My Own Lifestream

As I get older, the importance of leaving a legacy seems to weigh on me more and more. This is especially so since I don’t have any children (descendants) and I have family stories and family history that I want passed down to future generations.

So I’ve recently embarked on writing simple “one page” life stories or *vignettes* about my life. I keep a “to do list” where I jot down story ideas when they come to mind. And then at least once a week, I carve out some “me time” to work on these stories. The best part? I consider these “one pagers” to be in “modular” mode – meaning, they are good as stand-alone stories but can be compiled together into a book to share with family. Here are some of my recent stories:

- **Auto-biography:** A very basic overview of my life so far, from my birth in 1962 to my recent marriage. This could also serve as the basis for my obituary.
- **Alzheimer’s Disease story:** I’ll admit it is difficult to condense my 15-year journey as caretaker for my mother who was diagnosed at age 59 with Alzheimer’s Disease to a one page document. But this short story can serve as a way for me to write several other “one pages” on sub-topics such as diagnosis, legal issues, financial issues, and dealing with loss.
- **Weight Loss story:** I recently lost over 100 pounds thanks to breakthroughs in modern medicine. While I realize that bariatric surgery (and in my case removal of 80% of my stomach) is not for everyone, my story has actually had a profound impact on friends and even strangers experiencing weight loss issues.

While I'm not certain that my stories will inspire others to embark on their own lifestreaming encounter, I hope so. Here are some further thoughts on why we as genealogists need to focus on our own lives:

- If you don't write your story, you leave it to someone else to do so. Or it may not be written at all.
- Noted genealogy educator Judy Russell, in her lecture "Just Three Generations" <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2014/02/07/just-three-generations/> at RootsTech 2014, discussed how "Without a real effort to pass down our family stories purposely and accurately, the richness and depth they add to our family history can be lost in just three generations."
- Without a commitment to preservation of accurate details and information, storytelling can become like the game of Operator and become distorted as a result of cumulative and compound errors.

Lifestreaming is NOT New

- The first documented lifestreamers were actually cavemen. Consider the cave paintings at Lascaux, France: they tell a story of daily life and important events.
- Next, consider stained glass windows in Gothic churches during the middle ages. They told a story to a population that was mainly illiterate. New technology adapted to old practice of storytelling.
- While we seem overwhelmed with technology available for storytelling and lifestreaming, understand it was not always this way. There was basically a 200 year period until the printing press made printed material available to the common person.
- Our ancestors didn't feel their lives were important enough to document; in modern times, social media and digital media have made the process more democratic. The tools are often free, or low-cost, and easily accessible. There are no impediments or gatekeepers.
- What is lifestreaming without storytelling? It is simply a series of images, posts, audio – "snippets" – that the viewer is left to interpret without any backstory from the content originator. Consider an old scrapbook . . . did you ever wonder why an ancestor assembled these articles and ephemera items? Wouldn't it be nice to have a commentary as to "why" these items were important?
- In addition, social media means that there is more than just "listening" to stories or "watching" lifestreams; now there are audience options for participation.
- Before there was radio or television, families sat around the living room sharing not just what they did that day, but also family stories and history. Each person had a perspective and a filter. Most stories were preserved as oral history and counted on at least one person memorizing the story as it was told. Very often, stories are "embellished" much like the game of Operator – as they get passed down the line, they may lose certain facts and aspects as well as gain some.

- Have you located old family photos with no identifying information? Is this still possible with digital age lifestreaming? How did photography change lifestreaming when it became accessible to most people?

A Genealogist's Perspective

- **Walk the walk.** How many of us as writers and as lecturers are actually following through on the advice we give to other genealogists and family historians? We write articles, but have we written our own one page autobiography? Have we written up character sketches for our ancestors? Have we documented and preserved our family stories?
- **Social media.** Are you concerned that lifestreaming is either “lacking” or is “too easy” and that users are not getting the most out of the material being documented? What are the challenges of a family history writer in the digital age? How do we convince “curators” that they need to not just “augment” what they are capturing but also preserve the content?

Augmenting Social Media

Adding value to items to effectively tell stories and provide a full lifestreaming experience is not new. When photographs became common place, how many of our relatives wrote on the back and provided information such as the date, the location, the subject and more.

And then we had that damned digital feature where the date (and not always the current date) appeared on the photo prints in the lower right hand corner? Now with digital photography and “smart devices” we can automatically add time, date and even location via GPS coordinates.

Storytellers simply need to plan for adding value in order to tell the full story.

Storytellers Wanted

Lifestreaming should not be seen as a substitute for storytelling; instead it should be utilized as a storytelling platform even if obvious storytelling features are not available. There will always be a need for storytellers and those who can tell stories across different media will be the most successful

Apps, Programs and More – Oh My!

Do you feel overwhelmed with the number of options available for lifestreaming today? Imagine when our ancestors first encountered photography: in the early phase of the technology, our families would go to a studio to be photographed by a professional since the equipment was expensive the technology to process photos was not easily accessible. Then in the early 1900s, hand held cameras became affordable and every family could take photos and “lifestream” with drugstores and other outlets processing photos. As the technology progressed, photography became more accessible and more affordable where now a camera is a “standard feature” of every mobile device.

- **Facebook:** While Facebook is the second largest website in terms of traffic (after Google), it no longer is the domain of younger users. The Baby Boomers are one of the largest demographics in terms of users.
 - What are these users doing in terms of capturing their status posts? Facebook realized this about a year ago and now serves up “memories” to users – allowing them to share posts from years past.
 - Other users are creating private Facebook groups for family members to share photos as well as memories.
 - Helper apps like **My Social Book** (<https://www.mysocialbook.com/>) allow you to curate your Facebook content into a print book.
- **Twitter:** Twitter falls into the category of “microblogging” with a specified 140 character limit on posted content. Posts often include links and photos.
 - How do you tell a story effectively with “space constraints”? Some liken “tweets” to the terseness of telegraph messages.
 - A review of how family historians are using Twitter reveals the use of diary and letter “snippets” from ancestral documents. John Quincy Adams “line a day” diary (https://twitter.com/jqadams_mhs).
- **Blogs:** The concept of a blog – or “web log” – has been around since 1995. Only in recent years have blogs been used to preserve family stories.
 - **Tillie’s Tales: A Southern Illinois Farm Girl’s 1930s Diaries**
<http://www.tilliestales.com/>
- **Pinterest:** Create a timeline for yourself or an ancestor; create a “digital scrapbook” of what you like.
 - **Ancestor John Ralph Austin**
<https://www.pinterest.com/abundantgenealogy/ancestor-john-ralph-austin/>
- **Instagram:** Post photos of your lifestream or an ancestor’s life.
 - **Genealogy photos on Instagram**
<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/genealogy/?hl=en>
- **Wearable Cameras:** Record your daily life in a series of photos.
 - **Get Narrative camera**
<https://getnarrative.com/>
- **Amazon Echo:** What if the Echo or a similar device didn’t just dispense information, but also collected it?
 - **What do Siri, Google Home, Amazon Echo and Alexa have to with Genealogy?**
<https://genealogysstar.blogspot.com/2017/03/what-do-siri-google-home-amazon-echo.html>

Don't Delay – Get Started Today

- As each day, week and month goes by our relatives get older, memories get fuzzier.
- In addition, technology changes – it isn't easy to keep up with the latest lifestreaming tools.
- Don't regret not interviewing a family member or capturing a family story from a first-hand witness and participant.

Lifestreaming Best Practices

- **Explain and label.** don't assume that a reader or listener in 2066 will know what “#genealogy” means.
- **Future proof your technology.** don't get “stuck” with an outdated app or file format no longer in use.
- **Backup your lifestreams.** Most social media and apps have a way to back up data but it isn't advertised. Also understand WHAT content is backed up and in what format!
- **Have an exit strategy for your content.** We spend so much time uploading information that many of us don't even know how to collect our data and download it if we had to – what if SnapChat or Instagram gave a 30 day notice that they were shutting down – do you know what to do? Do you have backup apps or platforms to handle the data?
- **Don't forget print!** Despite what you may have heard, print is not going away – many of our older relatives want a way to enjoy what we've lifestreamed but they don't have access to the original platforms. Consider photo books from online vendors or even “photo shops” at superstores like Costco or drugstores like Walgreens and CVS. These are affordable and have easy-to-use design features online allowing you to produce a professional looking book.
- **Lifestream smart.** Do double duty: when posting to social media and other apps, consider using methods that allow you to post once across several platforms. Hootsuite is an example: there is a free version that lets you post to Facebook, Twitter and other platforms all at the same time.