

NEW YORK TIMES, March 12, 2013

Hey, at Least You Can Be Virtually Immortal

Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

Cathi Nelson founded the Association of Personal Photo Organizers. She said people are often “overwhelmed with a lifetime” of photos and other memorabilia.

By J. PEDER ZANE

NO one will confuse typical retirees today with the Emperor Augustus, who constructed a huge mausoleum to celebrate his life for eternity. And yet they belong to the first generation of elders within easy grasp of something once so rare and valuable that relatively few historic figures could enjoy it until now: virtual immortality.

A page from John Butterfield’s illustrated memoir.

Where their grandparents may have left behind a few grainy photos, a death certificate or a record from Ellis Island, retirees today have the ability to leave a cradle-to-grave record of their lives. Their descendants will be able to witness births and first steps, Pee Wee football games and grade school dance recitals, high school graduations, wedding ceremonies, first homes, vacations and family reunions. They will also be able to read their opinions on politics and religion, know that they loved the music of Junior Kimbrough, the films of Billy Wilder, the New York Yankees and mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Ancestors from the distant past are, at best, names in the family Bible. Fifty, 100, even 500 years hence people will be able to see how their forebears looked and moved, hear them speak, learn about their aspirations and achievements and that sizzling ski trip to Vermont.

Ron W. Henriksen, a 66-year-old retiree from Houston, said the birth of his nephews led him to hire a company to make a film about his 98-year-old mother that combines old photographs, newspaper clippings and family documents with live interviews. “I realized that there would be generations of our family that would never get to know this remarkable woman,” he said, “and that just in the past few years such a project suddenly became doable.”

Two major forces are driving virtual immortality. The first and most obvious is relatively new technologies now so common most people take them for granted: inexpensive video cameras and editing programs, personal computers and social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They allow people to shoot thousands of pictures and hundreds of hours of video and to easily record every idea that pops into one’s head while flaming the Internet at 2 a.m.

These devices create a sharp break with the past. In earlier days people could say they wanted to leave their mark and be remembered but, as with the weather, most people did little about it. For centuries people recorded their lives in diaries. But this was a “fairly odd impulse that was indulged by a fragment

of the population,” according to Thomas Mallon, whose works include “A Book of One’s Own: People and Their Diaries.”

Keeping a diary was hard work: it took time, effort and intention. Arguably the most famous diarist of all, the 17th-century Englishman Samuel Pepys, kept his for only a decade.

Today, many people are creating virtual diaries every time they log on to the Internet or snap a photo on their phone.

These technologies dovetail with a larger cultural shift recognizing the importance of ordinary lives. Where Plutarch helped set a standard for historical biographies by chronicling the lives of noble Grecians and Romans, more recent writers like Robert Coles and Studs Terkel have shown the value of celebrating the lives of the uncelebrated. So has Dave Isay’s StoryCorps project, which has taped about 50,000 interviews between family members across the country that are featured in his best-selling books and on National Public Radio. The trend can also be seen in TV shows like “Downton Abbey” and “Mad Men,” period dramas that focus on the interactions and relationships of characters high and low. As Evelyn Waugh observed, “Nobody wants to read other people’s reflections on life and religion and politics, but the routine of their day, properly recorded, is always interesting.”

The shift is helping to redefine the concept of history, as people suddenly have the tools and the desire to record the lives of almost everybody. The ancient problem that bedeviled historians — a lack of information — has been overcome. Unfortunately, it has been vanquished with a vengeance.

The problem of too much information is painfully familiar to professional historians. H. W. Brands, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, read all 35 volumes of Benjamin’s Franklin’s writings for his biography of the founding father, “The First American” (2000). The focus of his next book, President Ronald Reagan, left behind more than 60 million documents. “President Nixon left behind five to six thousand hours of Oval Office tapes,” he said. “It would take a conscientious biographer three to four years just to listen to all of them. The challenge going forward will focus less on finding material, than in identifying the material that matters.”

Retirees face a similar problem. Most cannot count on historians to pore over, sift and cull the bytes and pieces of their lives. They must ask the hard question: How much time will their descendants — or even their living relatives — really want to spend reliving their lives? Is it more likely to be 20 hours or two?

“You are not doing the future a favor by leaving behind 4,000 blurry pictures of a soccer match,” said Sarah E. White, president of the Association of Personal Historians. “We need to figure out how to curate our lives, to sift through all the material we are generating to tell a story about ourselves that will have meaning to others after we’re gone.”

In response, a growing number of businesses and organizations have arisen during the last two decades to help people preserve and shape their legacy. Ms. White, who runs First Person Productions in Madison, Wis., said her association was founded in 1995 for professionals helping others write memoirs. Initially, personal computers were the modern marvel that simplified the process. “Then, as video-

editing programs like iMovie and Final Cut Pro became available, people could also start telling their stories through video and audio,” she said.

Cathi Nelson, a West Hartford, Conn., woman who first specialized in helping people compile traditional scrapbooks, said she embraced technology a decade ago when she realized that clients were “overwhelmed with a lifetime of printed photos, digital photos, media and memorabilia.” In 2009 she founded the Association of Personal Photo Organizers, whose paid membership has hit 650 in the last year.

Ms. Nelson said most of her members’ clients were retirees who finally had the time to reflect on their lives. Many need help digitizing the past — scanning dog-eared photographs, curling birth certificates and frayed Valentine Day’s cards, as well as transferring material from obsolete storage formats like cassette and VHS tapes. She added that current formats — hard disk drives, DVDs, even cloud storage — also cannot be relied upon for permanence, so it is essential to have a plan in place to keep archives current as technologies evolve. She said the printed book, paradoxically, remains one of the most enduring formats.

As her clients work to organize and make sense of these mountains of material, Ms. Nelson helps them distinguish between the small number of shots worth featuring in an album, the next tier still worth keeping and the many shots that belong in the trash. “I’ll usually take the trash bags home with me so they don’t go back and try to retrieve them,” she said with a laugh.

Finally, they arrange the photos and video clips, writing captions and recording voice-overs, so they tell a story. “I try to help people determine the goal,” Ms. Nelson said. “What is the main story they want to hold on to? What are the themes of your life? For instance, did you go on vacation every summer to the Cape? What is the story behind the summer vacation? Let’s gather everything you have from that to tell a story.”

Mary O’Brien Tyrrell, president of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review, has taken a similar approach to assist budding memoirists. She said her institute was inspired by the work of Robert N. Butler, the gerontologist who coined the term ageism, and the psychiatrist Dr. Gene D. Cohen. Before Dr. Butler began his work in the 1960s, Ms. Tyrrell said, “doctors often discouraged older people from reminiscing because they thought it would lead to senile dementia.”

Dr. Cohen believed that reflection was a natural stage of life. “Just like you know a baby should be up and walking at 1, when they get to be 80 they should be taking time to think and reflect back — the summing-up stage,” Ms. Tyrrell said. “This not only helps them see what they have done but helps them plan their next steps.”

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Dan Schuette, a 70-year-old retiree who lives in Sun Prairie, Wis., said he was surprised and inspired while writing 15 autobiographical stories he published in a book for his family. "I realized that I've had a pretty good life," he said. "It also made me focus on what I still want to do. I visit the graves of my father and my 12-day-old grandson who died and have conversations with them. I realized that if I want my kids and grandkids to come see me at my grave, maybe I should be a larger part of their life, maybe I should get in my car and see them when it isn't so convenient for me, or make another call."

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Stefani Twyford, who creates video biographies through her company, Legacy Multimedia in Houston, said many of her clients were baby boomers who wanted to record their own parents' lives. "There is a real sense that we can finally get these stories down and they want to act before it's too late," she said.

One of John Butterfield's daughters hired Ms. Twyford to make a DVD about his life for his 80th birthday. "They videotaped me and they talked to relatives and friends," recalled Mr. Butterfield, who is now 87 and lives in Sarasota, Fla. "Now, everyone they taped except my brother is dead. It told me to hurry up."

In December 2012, he self-published an illustrated memoir "for my great-grandchildren" that tells stories about his life and his family's history.

New devices and technologies are certain to further this immortality revolution; futurists are already imagining the day when people can have a virtual conversation with holograms of their ancestors that draw on digital legacies to reflect how the dead would have responded. Nevertheless, every change will serve an ancient impulse.

"People have always wanted to connect with other people and see that they have touched others, and made a difference," Ms. Twyford said. "What's changed is that we now have the tools to record and share their legacy, forever."