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# Genealogy and Oral History

Edward F. and Gerda Sundberg\*

In 1968 we walked into one of the old Sundberg family homes in Sweden. The genealogical chart we were hoping to complete while we were in Sweden, suddenly became a list of names, dates and places — nothing more. It was a bare-bones history of the family. We felt the need to add flesh and heart to the chart.

After a three-year search for a way of accomplishing this, we decided that we should tape the memories of the elders in the family. Regretfully, we were a bit late to accomplish much. Ed's mother had had a stroke, which caused her to lose her ability to talk and write. His father could no longer remember the people he knew when he was young. Fortunately others in the family could help us piece together a family history to complement our genealogical chart. From this experience our lives were changed. The "Ribbons of Memories" program was started. Later it was to be expanded to include many others who were not members of our family.

Our interests became two-fold — genealogy and oral history. We soon learned that what we had learned in our genealogical work enhanced our new oral history program and in turn the oral history program gave us clues to our family background we had never dreamed of.

Just a few weeks ago, we received a letter from one of Ed's cousins. He wrote as follows:

"Dear Ed and Family:

We are now approaching that time in our life when we think about what we plan to leave our progeny. It can't be money or property, 'cause there just ain't none', so the next best thing is our history.

We have started a search for roots as well as family. My wife has a line that goes back to Boston in 1635, while mine came to these shores in 1903.

You sent me some papers ten years ago. I couldn't for the life of me understand at that time why you wanted me to give you all that information. Now I understand".

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\*The Sundbergs reside at 600 Linda Vista Drive, Watsonville, CA 95076. For further information concerning oral history write to the Sundbergs. Be sure to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

The cousin continues — “We have signed up for a genealogy course at the local college”. In our reply to the cousin, we suggested that he should use some oral history techniques to help him with his preliminary steps. We wrote that he should first investigate what he knows about the family. He should sit down with his tape recorder and some photographs, letters, scrap books, and various mementos, such as medals, awards, citations, trophies and newspaper articles and record on tape what he knows of the people who passed them on to him. What a valuable collection of memories he would make for his children and his grandchildren. We just hope that he will now use oral history to help him “find” his roots and thus preserve his family heritage. We are sure that he knows more about his family than he himself realizes.

At a recent Conference on Oral History, held at North Park College and Theological Seminary April 7-9, 1983, the editor of *SAG* asked if we would write an article on the use of genealogical oral history techniques. The request sounded challenging. We had combined some genealogy with oral history for the expanded “Ribbons of Memories” — An American-Scandinavian Ethnic Heritage Oral History Program. We accepted the challenge.

Of course, we all must understand that such a combination is only one method of finding clues to the family heritage. Each clue found should be followed up in the usual and accepted way in order to discover substantiating information. Combining oral history techniques with genealogical efforts can only give a person clues to more concrete evidence. Oral history techniques can provide the interviewer with the legends and tales of the family, but they will also help others to “know” their ancestors. In this way the ancestors come to life.

Ed’s mother used to tell fascinating stories about the family. Somehow, we were able to remember some of them. They were the only clues we had to Ed’s family. For example, she once said that her mother’s side of the family was not pure Swedish blood, but that it was mixed with Dutch or Belgian ancestry. Her youngest brother, who is now researching the genealogy of the family, discounted her story or our remembrance of it. Yet, on March 2, 1983, he wrote the following:

“I found the enclosed item about the Lemon name. It may verify your information about the possibility of your Mormor’s (maternal grandmother’s) ancestors coming from Holland or Belgium, and also makes our search for her birth records in Östergötland seem correct”.

We will soon send him copies of *Swedish American Genealogist* which has had articles about the Walloons in Sweden. In this way a family legend presents a clue for further substantive information gathering. At the present time the uncle is in Sweden tracking down that particular clue as well as many others, all products of oral history techniques.

In order to enhance your genealogical research, you should sit down

with an elder member of the family and a photograph album, for example, while a tape recorder is operating. You should help that person recall his or her "hidden memories" of family members and friends when perceiving the photographic images. If you use questions which cannot be answered with just a name, date, or any simple answer, you can perhaps get the person interviewed to talk about the people she or he knew when he or she were young. You must be a willing and interested listener even though the story may have been recited over and over again. Every story or legend which the elder family member of the family tells or retells adds to the family history and may possibly yield clues for further investigation.

To begin such an oral history program, we suggest that you take time to study each photograph before the interview begins. You should not only look at the people, but also at each piece of clothing and each piece of jewelry, hoping to find something which will trigger a remembrance, something with a story behind it. If the picture was taken out-doors, then you should inspect the entire landscape. If you are familiar with the area, changes in the area should be discussed. Perhaps a house has burned down, a barn remodeled into a house, or an old house has been relegated to a chicken coop.

The second thing you should do is to identify each photo on the back. You should keep the identification method as simple as possible and have it coordinated with the family's genealogical research identifications. Names, location, time and occasion are also important.

When you begin the actual interview, you should first of all identify the tape thusly:

"This is \_\_\_\_\_ (full name of the interviewer). I am talking with \_\_\_\_\_ (full name of the person interviewed and the family relationship). We are looking at a photograph that is identified as \_\_\_\_\_. It is the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ (month) of \_\_\_\_\_ (year)."

Then the questioning can begin:

"Tell me the full name of each person in this photograph, as you remember it, their ages, and then tell me about the family relationships of each."

Other questions could be:

1. What do you remember about them?
2. Where was each born? Confirmed? Where did he/she go to school? What type of work did he/she do? What was the training like? Did he/she marry? Where did she/he work? When did he/she die? Where was he/she buried?
3. Tell me anything you have heard about them?
4. If he/she married into the family, what do you know about his or her family?
5. What was her name before she was married into the family? What do you know about the family?
6. Where were you when this picture was taken?

You should also ask about the horses, wagons, cars, boats, aircraft or anything else which may appear in the picture. You should not be discouraged about a series of "I don't know" answers. You should keep hoping for a bit of information, a possible clue to the family background. You should go on to the next photograph as soon as you realize that you have exhausted the knowledge of the person interviewed.

You can do the same with other mementos of the past. By simple changes in the questions, you may stumble upon a rich family heritage.

The use of oral history technique in genealogy is as new as the recording devices. You must remember that it is not a substitute for any other method used in genealogical research and that any information gained through the use of this technique must be substantiated by accepted genealogical research methods. But oral history techniques used properly may be the channel by which you may get new clues, when you feel that you have exhausted all other leads. The by-product is of course a very important aspect of the genealogical story, the filling out the skeleton with flesh and heart.

## Wretlind Once More

In connection with the article on Eric Wretlind and his city directory of Boston, MA, which appeared in a previous issue of *SAG* (Vol.II, No.3), a reference was made to Wretlind's statement in the foreword of his book as to his training as a druggist in Sweden. A check of the records of the Swedish Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences reveals that Knut Erik Wretlind received his bachelor's degree (*Farm.kand.*) from the Royal Pharmaceutical Institute in Stockholm Aug. 31, 1876 and that he passed the official examination as a licensed druggist in Stockholm May 21, 1880. It was shortly after his licensing that he emigrated to Boston. According to the same Swedish sources Wretlind became Swedish Norwegian vice consul in Omaha in 1883, *not* 1884.