

Introduction

In 1999, the Southwest Seattle Historical Society sponsored a group of community elders who have lived in West Seattle all or most of their lives. This group, called the “Long Timers,” had been meeting monthly for a number of years to share stories and reminisce. Pat Filer, the Director of the Log House Museum in West Seattle, wanted to capture these stories for the Historical Society archives. She had tried to video- and audio-tape the group meetings, but the results were a mishmash of conversations that were difficult to decipher.

About that time, Pat and I were in a class sponsored by the Museum of History of Industry in Seattle. During the class, I mentioned that I conduct workshops on memoir writing and assist individuals and families when they wish to record their stories.

During a break, Pat introduced herself and told me of her dilemma. She wondered if there was a way to encourage the Long-Timers to write their stories. I suggested that we could put together a series of “memory-sparking” questions in workbook form and give them out to the community elders. I also suggested that we also have a workshop to get them started and show them how easy it is to write personal memoirs.

We compiled a workbook of questions about the community’s history and what it was like to live there in the first half of the twentieth century. West Seattle is a beach community, so many of the questions reflected living and playing on the beach: *Was the beach a “free-play” area for you? What did*

BUNGALOW GROCERY – 1934

By Keith McGonagill

*We lived in three rooms behind the store,
The bedroom faced the Sound
Providing a constantly changing scene
For enjoyment all year-round.
There were clouds and ships and blackfish
And crimson displays at sundown,
But winter storms were matchless
For holding one spellbound.*



you do for fun at the beach besides swimming? Describe a typical day. Describe your swimming apparel. What was your favorite swimsuit? Tell about participating in the fishing derbies? We also included photographs of people and landmarks from the past: the local soda fountain, Luna Park (sometimes called the “Coney Island of the West”), a bandstand, the Natatorium, and much more.

This workbook approach also gave us the opportunity to reach people who no longer live in the local area.

At this point, I have to admit that I did not really expect to get a huge response from the Long-Timers. I thought that getting five or ten of the workbooks back with a few stories was about all we could count on. Fortunately, I was very wrong. Thanks to Pat’s enthusiasm and her continued efforts to keep up interest in the project, out of 75 workbooks distributed, we got 42 back! That is a 56% response rate! (Anyone who does survey work will tell you that a 20% response is considered excellent.) Some of the books had writing in the margins and pages added. Folks were hungry to share their stories!

As this project evolved, it came to be known as the “Memory Book Project.” The Long-Timers would bring photographs, scrapbooks, and mementos to share at monthly meetings. Pat Filer realized that these unexpected treasures would be priceless additions to the book and valuable in the Museum archives. So, we scheduled two “scanning days” at the Museum. People brought in their items and waited while we scanned them. With this method, they did not have to let these precious possessions out of their sight. One lady brought in a comprehensive scrapbook of her life, complete with lovely dance cards and journal entries dating back to

the 1920s. The Museum acquired over 175 images for their archives in those two days.

Now began the difficult part: choosing which stories, quotes, and images to use in the final publication. The book was categorized by subject, such as “Beach Memories,” “Lifeguards,” “Beach Houses,” “Pastimes,” and “School Memories.” There are over 125 previously unseen photos and even more stories in the 42-page book! We printed one large-format book (17" x 11"), which was displayed in the Museum. We printed smaller (11" x 8½") replica books that are sold in the Museum gift shop.

This project was successful for the Historical Society in many ways:

- ☞ Elders in the community felt ownership of the book.
- ☞ The Historical Society received many stories and images which it might not have otherwise acquired.
- ☞ Many people were touched by this project and are now contributing to the Museum in new ways. They have become financial supporters, volunteers, docents, lenders of artifacts, and donors.
- ☞ The Museum also created a children’s version of the memory book, which includes a section on how to collect their own neighborhood stories. This adds to the Museum’s Heritage Education Outreach Program.
- ☞ The Museum prepared an exhibit which highlighted the book and included artifacts and additional stories and images.
- ☞ The books were sold in the gift shop, resulting in revenue for the Historical Society.
- ☞ Community members and Museum visitors became more aware of the local historical society and learned that local history is their history.
- ☞ In May 2000, the Memory Book Project received a Long Term Project Award from the Association of King County Historical Organizations (AKCHO).

There has also been an unanticipated positive outcome from these projects: participants and their families have been inspired to continue writing and collecting their memoirs for their own use. Even after the first Memory Book Project was completed, the gift shop was able to sell copies of the blank workbooks to community members who had not participated in the project. They used them as memory sparkers for writing their own stories.

“Stories from the past are a glue that bonds the listener with the teller.”

~Vera Rosenbluth,
author of *Keeping
Family Stories Alive*

Because of our success with this project, Pat and I have given many lectures and workshops to local and state historical organizations on how to conduct a Memory Book Project. We prepared a “how-to” brochure which has been sent to interested groups throughout the US and Canada. We even received a request from a historian in Australia!

In July 2001, Pat and I again assisted the Long-Timer’s of the Log House Museum in publishing their second memory book, *Memories of Southwest Seattle Businesses*. This project was bigger and better than the first. (We learned a lot from our first project!)

As I began working with the Issaquah (Washington) Historical Society and with longtime members of Boy Scout Troop 281 in West Seattle on similar Memory Book Projects, I realized that a detailed Project Director’s Guide would be beneficial for any organization who would like to conduct such a project.

I hope this book will make it easy for you to implement a Memory Book Project in your organization.

Cathy Fulton
Capturing Memories
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