

Summer 2016

# ANCESTRAL AVENUES

## WRITE YOUR LIFE STORY



*by Martha Everman Jones, PhD*

How do you want to be remembered? When you have moved on and others read about your life, what do you want to have printed in your obituary? Some obituaries are so short they barely cover the basic data of a person being born, married, and died. Others, on the opposite end of the spectrum “gild the lily” and serve to make a person seem bigger than life. In fact, some are almost humorous, especially if the reader has personal knowledge of the deceased and considers them less than pillars of the community. Yes, our parents told us not to speak ill of the dead but on the other hand, we do not want to make them saints.

A death in a family is a very stressful situation. The duty of composing an obituary in record time with accurate information only adds to the hardship. Will your loved ones have difficulty composing an obituary for you? Who know best about you and your life? Of course, the answer is, *you do*. Therefore, I challenge you to write your own story, your own obituary. Do not say, “One of these days . . .,” do it now. And how do you get started? Here are 10 easy steps to writing your own history from Juliana Smith in Ancestry.com. I offer them to you with my paraphrasing.

**1. Schedule some "me" time.**

Each day allow time to reflect on the day and on your life as a whole. It can be the most convenient for you—after a hectic day, before the morning rush, or while your spouse is watching a TV show you despise.

- 2. Make it convenient.** Choose your own tools, perhaps a laptop or if you are more comfortable with a journal and pen, find one you can take with you anywhere. You can write while you are on a swing in the garden, in a doctor's waiting room, on break or lunch at work, or waiting on a train.
- 3. Do a little at a time.** The secret is to write a little at a time. This makes the task much less intimidating. If you focus on smaller periods of your life and don't try to record it all at once, the project will seem much more manageable. Jot notes for later reference. It doesn't necessarily have to be done in chronological order and you can pick and choose your focus as the mood strikes or as memories are stirred.
- 4. Interview yourself.** Ask yourself questions you would ask an ancestor if you had the opportunity. What information is most important to you and to other family members?
- 5. Live it up with current events.** Include events in the news during the period you are recording. Your history will be more illuminating as you set it against the context of the times. By recalling historical events, you will be stirring more personal memories.
- 6. Jog your memory.** Photographs, letters or cards, yearbooks, and other memorabilia can all serve to bring back memories pushed to the back of your brain. Familiar smells and sounds can also be powerful memory stimulants.
- 7. Include family and friends.** Add tidbits about those around you. This offers descendants better insight into family relations and the way you interact with others.
- 8. Let your light shine through.** By sharing your thoughts, ideals, favorite quotes, and jokes, you will give your readers a glimpse into your true self and let them know what a truly unique and wonderful person you are!
- 9. Get help online.** There are many sites online that can give ideas, stimulation, and information to help you create a captivating personal history. A good one is Writing the Journey: Online Journal Writing Website [www.writingthejourney.com/](http://www.writingthejourney.com/).
- 10. Make it fun.** There are no rules. If you have fun creating your memoirs your readers will most likely have fun reading them. Be as creative as you want, and include whatever you want such as photos, textiles, maps, pressed flowers from your garden, news or magazine articles, receipts, recipes, song lyrics or poetry, favorite quotations and jokes, cards you've received, a picture of a sunset—anything that makes you happy or sad or makes you think.

And one more suggestion: Find some photos of yourself that can be included with your obituary. When genealogists locate a family member's photo, the person suddenly comes to life and hereditary family resemblances somehow sparkle while adding special touches to the family history.

Whatever way you choose to preserve your memories, they will be a reflection of you and your devotion to preserving your family history. Your family will love you for it, especially when the time comes to compose your obituary.

Happy researching and writing your own history for your *Ancestral Avenues*.