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COMMUNICATING, ORGANIZING, AND SHARING FAMILY HISTORY
PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS, AND PHILOSOPHY

MARLO E. SCHULDT

One of humankind's most prized possessions, and the thing that separates us from the animals, is our ability to communicate.

Humans live in a highly verbal society that has evolved and has mastered many diverse forms of communication. Drums in the jungle, smoke signals on the plains, signal flags, letters, libraries, telegraph, the wireless short wave, Morse code, telephone, radio, sign language, television, satellite phones, and e-mail, not to mention the advent and impact of the cell phone. Now it is possible to play games, send text messages, take photos, designate the caller with a special song or ring tone, and access the Internet, all with the same cell phone that allows us to communicate from almost anywhere, at any time, to almost anyone in the world.

On a more basic level, humans communicate in many subtle ways, such as a wink, a tone of voice, the cadence of words, and the gestures used to express actions. Even the way people sit and move as they speak sends information about them.

Communication may take even more abstract forms, such as tattoos, ceremonial dress, makeup, hairdos, feathers, and medals worn that represent skill and rank. Even graduation, wedding, and sports rings send nonverbal messages. People today are immersed in a world filled with many different forms of communication.

The challenge of family historians is to find the best methods to accurately perceive, capture, and convert these messages into interesting stories for the benefit of present and future generations.

Definitions and Associational Problems - *in a word*

Communication in any form, no matter how laboriously prepared and translated, may be inherently inaccurate or may unintentionally convey different meanings to the reader, listener, or viewer than what was intended. What causes this? A good example may be found in the common dictionary or thesaurus. A quick study reveals that almost every word has multiple definitions or synonyms. This probably indicates that there are not a sufficient number of words in the human language, so the same words are reused in different contexts.

This dictionary lists seventeen different uses for the word *do*

Consider how the usage and tense of the word *read* changes when used in a sentence. For example, "He read the book with great interest." However, when the same word is used as a question, "Can you read?" the pronunciation changes. Conversational speech becomes even more complicated since there may be no difference in the way the words *read* or *red* are spoken in a sentence as demonstrated in the phrase, "He read the red book."

The specific meanings communicated during conversational speech become more confusing if the speaker and listener associate the same words with different meanings. Both the speaker and listener may initially be unaware of these differences while they are conversing. However, later in their discussion, these little misunderstandings may culminate in a heated debate that hopefully ends with apologies, clarification of terms, and a handshake. This confusion of meaning frequently occurs when people of different religions attempt to discuss and share their beliefs. Ideally both parties will discover they are arguing the same point, just using different words!

Legal professionals have long been aware of the problems lay people have in understanding legal terminology. Lawyers have adopted a simple solution. A legal contract usually starts with a list of definitions of the words that will be used in the text of the contract. However, even these highly defined contracts can still be argued at great length in court.

Time has the power to magically change the meaning of words, adding more confusion. Some words die out while new words creep in with the next generation. Old words, like *cool* may take on a new meaning that does not have anything to do with temperature. Regional differences of word meaning and pronunciation may cause confusion or embarrassment for newcomers or "outsiders." Translation from one language to another presents even more confusion.

What can the family historian do to minimize misunderstanding and reduce the confusion generated by imperfect language?
1. When interviewing, avoid asking questions that result in a yes/no answer. Draw the person out to increase clarity by asking the standard who, what, how, and why questions. "How did you feel about that?" "Why do you think that happened?"
2. When necessary, present additional information that adds, expands, or provides a different perspective than may be found in the written or verbal accounts of different individuals.
3. Supply related information about the event or story in the form of photos, video clips, written descriptions, or newspaper accounts.
4. Provide references. Obviously, such great detail and depth would be necessary only to clarify important or controversial information containing obvious discrepancies.

In summary, it is important to be aware of how miscommunication occurs to avoid adding another layer of confusion to the information gathered and communicated to others. Family historians must try to create records or histories that are accurate, unbiased, and nonjudgmental since they probably were not there to observe and record. It is not a sin to use the word *about* when referring to dates or times.

Can Accuracy be Flexible?

Unfortunately, accuracy may often be more relative than absolute. It is true that dates, names, times, and locations are concrete references. My response to this statement is, "It all depends on the veracity, perceptiveness, and attention to detail of the witness, reporter, and recorder." Two or three witnesses may not confirm a fact unless the observers have conferred and modified their original renditions of the facts so that they all agree. The most prudent course is to present all the original accounts, even if the "facts" conflict or contradict. This will make it possible for readers or viewers to form their own opinions.

Another problem in creating an accurate family history may be the skill of the editor, and not the facts. By default and regardless of qualifications, limited resources may require the family historian to become the archivist, editor, or storyteller. Try as they may to be objective, their

bias may be indirectly communicated by the selection of the information published. The amount of material shared may also be restricted by limited monetary resources.

How, then, can family historians create accurate accounts? The obvious answer is not to quote or take any material out of the original context. However, including all the supporting material of a quote may unreasonably increase the size of the account, document, book, or presentation. One solution is to cite a reference containing the original content. Unfortunately, this may create yet another problem if the reader cannot access or view a reference because it is no longer available or it is stored in a remote location. What should the family historian do in this situation? Get the necessary permission and duplicate or copy the source material. Next, scan the content into a digital format to be stored in a personal CD/DVD family archive for future reference.

Another solution that improves the accuracy and reliability of information is to let individuals tell their own stories in their own words—spoken, written, or video taped. This creates a first-person record that is directly attributable to the person interviewed. This also helps reduce many of the confusing aspects of communication mentioned in this article. Personal interviews and accounts help keep information in the current or historical context.

Organization—*just another synonym for frustration*

It is helpful to understand that family information may be found in many forms and in many places, such as photos, old letters, journals, albums, deeds, documents, tape recordings, records, 8mm movies, old family bibles, VHS tapes, and other memorabilia.

All of this material needs to be organized and preserved. In my personal experience, the meaningful and logical organization of these materials became highly frustrating and essentially impossible to achieve initially *or to maintain*. This conclusion was the result of hundreds of hours of trial-and-error attempts at devising different ways to categorize and organize family history information.

Picture in your mind (pun intended with mixed meaning) my entire living room floor covered with carefully arranged stacks of photos. Something resembling organization resulted when the stacks of photos went into a box with tabbed folders and labeled file separators. However, this accomplishment was short lived. My children decided to look through and explore the newly organized family photo collections on a couple of different occasions *in my absence*. Briefly stated, my children did not put the photos back into the groups I had worked so long and hard to create. My photo collection box reminded me of the sorting shelves in

a library and I had just become the new librarian. After calming down, I realized that the photo collection also belonged to the family and that they should have the right to look at and enjoy the

photos even if mass disorganization resulted. I also had to concede that photos are to be looked at and shared, not just organized and stored away in untouchable files!

All was not lost. Eventually, I found and developed a very flexible and useful way to organize all my family history media. The solution will come later in the discussion.

Why Organization Seems Impossible

There is an old phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words." This statement also demonstrates why photos cannot be logically organized into collections. Just as one word has several meanings, one photo may contain several people, making it difficult to determine where to store the photo. Until recently, the only solution was to make several duplicates of the photo so it could be placed into several different collections. This is a costly solution. Creating duplicate images to be imported into a computer is also unacceptable because duplicate files use additional disk space.

Another problem with organization is that it requires a defined target or a specific outcome to work toward. The outcome also helps determine the foundation and structure of the organizational system being developed and used. In other words, what is the goal of organizing all of the information? Initially, the family historian might not know what can be accomplished until the information has been imported into a computer.

Determining a starting place or continuing the attempt to become organized may seem more difficult than answering the age-old question, "Which came first: the chicken or the egg?" Initially, the purpose for organization may be to preserve, protect, and get all information into one place—the computer. However, this random, undirected approach to get everything into the computer will create even bigger problems in the future.

The fruits and failures of attempts at organization may not be manifest until a specific photo or media file is retrieved from among the thousands of files already stored in the computer, on CDs or DVDs, or in other devices. The family historian then has great difficulty in finding and pulling all these resources together to create a volume of family history, video presentation, slide show, calendar, or other project.

What can be done? The Mixed Media section below offers suggestions on how and where to start and how to eliminate the need to make duplicate photos.

Bringing it all Together – *Using Mixed Media Collections*

Thus far, several of the problems and barriers associated with finding, organizing, presenting, communicating, and verifying historical information have been discussed. The article will now look at some workable solutions to these problems.

It should now be obvious that the capability to organize, store, retrieve, and preserve different kinds of information becomes an absolute necessity even though it seems an impossible task. The recommended solution will require the use of a personal computer with external storage capability found on CDs/DVDs, external hard drives, or other storage devices. It will be necessary to start converting and reducing original source information into digital files using a scanner, digital camera, word processor, and video and audio capture devices. Yes, this sounds

like a monumental task, but it will be worth it and not be as hard as one might imagine! If that thought is overwhelming, consider just starting with current materials.

Some forethought, preparation, and planning is imperative, and will save much confusion and frustration later when attempting to find and access media files. It is essential to consider some new or different approaches to organizing and storing information.

Before beginning this process, it is important to relax and not to get overwhelmed by the project. For the next few moments, think and reminisce about various recent activities. Give some thought to the categories of these experiences.

For example:
Baptisms
Baby blessings
School graduations
Birthday parties
Family vacations
Easter egg hunts
Hiking or camping trips
Family reunions
Humorous events

Important Note: Please fight the desire to begin immediately creating or moving files into a computer thinking to organize them later—this is a big mistake and creates even bigger problems later!

These and other events represent modern family history and are an easy place to begin the experiment with organization and information storage.

Chances are good that there are photos, video clips, or maybe even journal entries about the event. Consider letting these events become natural topic headings for organizing information. Next, create a list of topic headings to be used for folders and file names to store various types of media, such as photos, video clips, and text files. Do not make it complicated or too exhaustive; keep topic headings natural and simple. Here is a sample of topic headings with some subheadings from my personal family history information system:

- **Olsen Family History**
    - Martin Flat Dry Farm
    - Carl Steen Olsen Home
    - Wagon Box Prophecy
    - Fishing on Willow Creek
    - TE Olsen's Mission
- **Australian Mission**
    - Sydney Mission Home
    - Parramatta
    - Toowoomba
- **Grandkids' Birthdays**
    - Mary's Second
    - Ethan's Third
    - Jacob's Fourth
- **Kathleen's Wedding**
   - Kathleen Growing Up
    - Nate Growing Up

- o Courtship
- o Engagement
- o Marriage
- **Hikes and Bikes**
  - o Provo Canyon
  - o Aspen Grove
- **Vacations**
  - o Disneyland 1985
  - o Yellowstone 2004

Organization, classification, and retrieval of resources will be greatly improved by placing all the related files into specific folders whether the family historian is using electronic folders or a hardcopy system.

For example, I placed photos, sound files, video clips, topographical maps, GPS coordinates, and text files (documents) into the Wagon Box Prophecy, Martin Flat Dry Farm, and Fishing on Willow Creek collections.

The organization, association, and storage of these media files into "topic" collections provide the ability to immediately view, listen to, study, and edit these resources. This resource combination greatly amplifies, associates, clarifies, and deepens the understanding of anyone viewing or listening to the material. Best of all, this type of resource organization and presentation naturally piques viewer/listener curiosity, while beckoning them to continue to interactively explore related topics and resources.
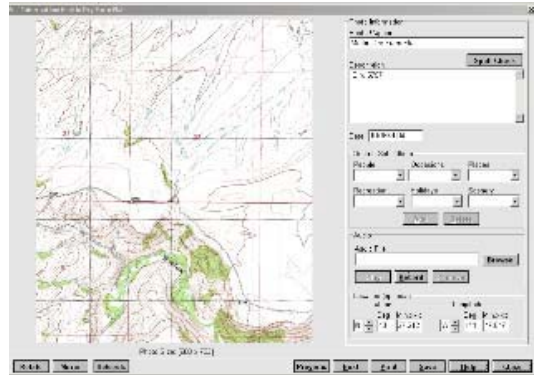
Most photos have been taken to preserve a special event or occasion. One temptation when organizing is to place photos into collections identified with a person's name such Mary's Photos, or use the date photos were taken as a file or folder name. This may seem to be an easy and logical way to organize photos. These actions will ultimately cause three serious problems:

1. The original event and the context of the photos taken at that time will be lost. Photos and video or audio recordings were made to preserve an event or celebration. Moving these files to different collections will cause the event or photo to become lost, meaningless, and confusing to others. Remember, the event or topic serves as a natural reference point with which to associate the information resources gathered about the experience.
2. Collections can become very large and unmanageable. This usually happens when a collection or a folder is created using a person's name. It may seem logical to copy or move every file or resource relating to a person into a single file or collection. Over time, this will create a collection that becomes so large and unmanageable that the file cannot be moved from a computer to a CD or DVD for archiving or preservation. If personal names must be used for the title of a collection, break the file or collection up into a natural chronology. Mary's Baby Photos, Mary Growing Up, Mary the Adolescent, Mary in High School, and so forth.
3. Folders that are named with dates are very difficult to use. Most camera software automatically creates folders named with the date the photos were imported. This is definitely *not* a good way to organize and store photos. In six months or a year, when a

specific photo is wanted, it is not always possible to remember the exact date the photo was imported into the computer. It is then necessary to start opening many folders and scrolling through endless lists of files or thumbnails trying to find the right photo. This problem will become severely compounded if there are lots of photos. The same is true for video clips.

The Absolute Necessity of a Database

Collectively and loosely speaking, all photos, text documents, sound files, and video clips form a base of information or library of files. Unfortunately, most people are already painfully aware of the time loss and futility of hunting through countless folders and stacks of CDs to find the necessary resources. Using a database search engine *should* make it much easier to find all the photos for a book, slide show, or special presentation.

Over the years, a statement has continued to persist in the computer industry, in spite of all the wonderful technological advances that have been made.

<p align="center">"Garbage in = Garbage out"</p>

The preceding discussion has supplied the information necessary to negate the "garbage in" portion of the statement by first being selective in choosing the material and then carefully organizing the resources once they are imported into the computer. The following discussion will provide the information necessary to eliminate the "garbage out" part of the statement.

Traditional computer databases have been around for a long time and were originally designed to retrieve files and information stored in a computer. Unfortunately, most of the traditional and more modern database systems were not designed with the family historian in mind, and are therefore complicated, costly, and inflexible. The challenge then becomes finding or developing a robust relational database that can be easily used to find and quickly access useful information.

During the past four years I have been involved with some dedicated, creative, and intelligent individuals who developed and tested a highly flexible database specifically designed for family history purposes. This new database will search captions, descriptions, characteristic tags, dates, hot spots, and GPS coordinates and display the results in seconds. It can create and search offline archived CDs/DVDs, providing thumbnail images on the computer so the family historian knows which CD or DVD to insert to locate the desired media. This feature also solves the problem of large photo, video, and audio files filling up the hard drive while archiving and preserving the resources. The database is embedded into a comprehensive management system offering all the tools family historians need to maintain, preserve, manage, and share all their family history resources. This software program will appear in the reference section.

The Art and Science of Story Telling

In my opinion, photos, video clips, sound files, and text documentation should be combined and used to relate stories that will entertain, amuse, educate, and transmit significant values to our posterity in a stimulating multimedia environment.

What are the basic elements of a good story?

Photos – Allow the viewer to associate a name with a face. Photo captions, descriptions, and hot spots (a mouse over used to designate a name, description, and play a sound file) give meaning and enhance interest. Photos help visualize the different parts of any story. A photo can tell a complete story. Adding hot spots allow others not present to "speak" and orally tell the story contained in the photo.

Maps – Provide directions and "where" the story exists in terms of geography or topography. A map shows how to travel to the general location.

GPS Coordinates – Tell exactly where the event occurred. The audience (children and relatives) may want to visit the exact location to see, feel, or experience something tangible about the event.

Dates – The "when" of the event gives an actual reference in time and history allowing for the association of other concurrent events with the experience.

Video Segments – The combination of seeing and hearing communicates emotions that make the story engaging, believable, and real. That is why people like to watch movies and will even pay money for the privilege of seeing, feeling, and hearing.

Oral History – Written or typed stories can never compensate for the loss of actually hearing or experiencing the personality of the speaker. The accent, vocal quality and pitch, the way they laugh, or the pauses accentuated by a little sniffle, punctuate the sincerity or tenderness of the memory that is being shared. A personal declaration is much more sensitive and powerful when spoken.


What makes a good story?

There is a simple answer. The very best stories are actual, ordinary, everyday experiences everyone can understand and relate to. For example, a humorous experience is funniest when readers can easily put themselves in the shoes of the one who experienced it or was responsible for the embarrassing event.

A good story can teach, entertain, and motivate at the same time.

Stories are the little bits of reality remembered and shared that make each person interesting and unique.
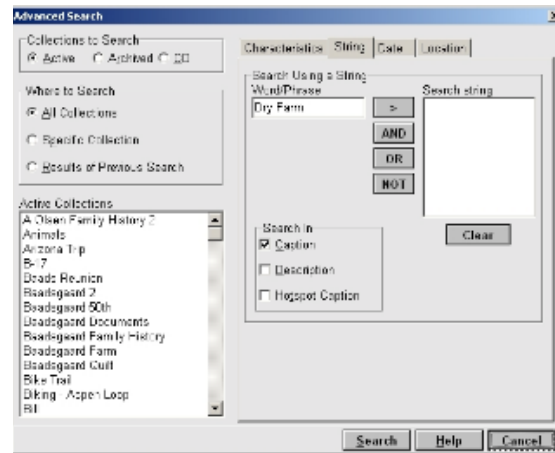
The most motivating stories are the ones that demonstrate sacrifice and the rewards that result from the dogged tenacity to hold tightly to solid family values and principles. It is through stories that posterity will come to know and vicariously experience memorable events just as if they were there to experience the event. In a sense, it allows for the projection of individuals through time into the future, via voices, images, video clips, and written descriptions of meaningful events. It allows for the sharing of personal experiences and strong convictions by embedding them into the context of real life experiences.

Finally, and most importantly, *family history stories have the power to turn the hearts of the children to their forbears*. As editors and storytellers, we will also start to feel our hearts being turned to our yet unborn posterity as we prepare family stories for them.

At a future time, we will become a forbear that will speak as one from the past because we will be gone, but our influence and a record of our experiences will still be here to help protect them as they learn and grow, treading the same paths we walked many years before.

Reference
LifeStory Productions, Inc.
ProMedia Manager Suite
http://photocollector.net

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