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Genealogy and Oral History: The Skeleton and the Flesh

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My grandmother, Iola Harriet Bird Embry, was an avid genealogist. She was actually more than that; she was a fanatic. Every winter she packed up her old car tied together with baling twine, complete with Idaho license plates, and headed south with the "birds." She traveled throughout the Deep South, tromping through public and family cemeteries, peering over old court records, and hunting down family names and dates wherever she could find them. The LDS Church Genealogical Society microfilmed her twenty volumes of records, proving a valuable source for other genealogists interested in the South. But once my grandmother collected the names her work was finished.

I am not a genealogist. Looking at names and dates consumed Grandma's life, and I do not want to do that. But I am a fanatic in another way. I am an oral historian. I am always looking for stories. Once it took me almost a week to get from Provo, Utah, to Southern Utah because I stopped in every small town, at every post office or local store, and then interviewed anyone who had taught or attended the local school. Sometimes I just collect the stories; I do not even bother to gather the dates and places.

I used to question my grandmother's interest in dates and places. Stories seemed much more interesting. But as I age and try to write, I realize that both are essential. The dates and places seemed "bare bones," simply the skeleton to me. But my stories are deficient if I do not have the base information to expand when and where the events took place. All of the journalist's questions—who, what, where, why, and when—are important. It takes the skeleton and the flesh, the dates and the stories, to be complete.

Sometimes oral history is essential in order to construct the skeleton, because there are no other records. The classic example is Alex Haley who traveled to Africa to collect the stories. He returned with a genealogy that traced his family back to an ancestor who was kidnapped, never to be heard of again in the village. Some have questioned whether the story tellers in Africa told Haley their age-old stories or what he wanted to hear. But no one can question the impact that Haley's "Roots" had on those interested in learning more about their ancestors.

Many Americans do not have the same problem that Haley had. Although it is often hard work, they can find the names, dates, and places of their ancestors. These skeletons are essential to help families understand who they are and where they have been. Equally important to me is learning about who the people were. If I am going to spend eternity with them, I want to know more than their names and birthdates. But I also need to know their names and not just their stories.

So I compare genealogy to the skeleton—the bare bone dates and places—with the oral history stories that flesh out those facts. My best example of how genealogy and oral history can work together is an interview I conducted with my father, Bertis Lloyd Embry. I took my first
oral history class in 1973, and I had been working full time as an oral historian since 1979. But it took the death of three uncles in 1981 before I decided I should interview my parents. My father was my very best interviewee. He had always wanted to write his life story, but he had not been successful. It was all in his head though. I asked one question, and he talked for three hours summarizing his life.

The next day I talked to my father about his family. I could recite my great grandfather’s name, James Columbus Embry; I had to look up his dates. His son Albert Leo Embry was my grandfather. My father had five brothers and sisters, Alvin, Erma, Ralph, Elsie, and Leora. Just looking at their dates raises a lot of questions that my father answered in his interview.

My father was born in Tipton County, Tennessee on 23 November 1914; he died on 28 January 1999 in Cache County, Utah. So how did a southern boy end up in Utah? While the simple answer is that his grandfather and parents were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there are far more interesting stories. James Columbus Embry was born in Georgia. His family had gone there for one year to farm, and then returned to Tennessee. James bought the family farm and raised cotton, melons, and peanuts. He was "a respected member of the community. People looked to him for advice in farming. He was forward in his day. . . . He was willing to try new things and to do new things."

Mormon missionaries traveled through the rural area of Tennessee, and James "was always one to take in people." He listened to their message and decided to join their church. After that his "home was the center for the missionaries." Sometimes there would be fifteen or twenty missionaries at his table. "He would say, 'Okay, boys. There it is. If you want to eat it up from the wife and kids, go for it.' Of course, this used to discourage the younger elders. The older ones knew better. He always had plenty to eat."2

James’ farming had a lasting effect on my father. Everyone over six had to help chop cotton. "We would start work at four o’clock in the morning and work until two or three in the afternoon. Then it was so hot that we couldn't do very much." The sand flies were so bad "they would just about eat up." My father always loved peanuts. His grandfather had a barrel in the back storeroom, and "I remember as a small boy always having a pocketful of the peanuts. I could always replenish it." In 1940 my father visited his grandfather and helped peddle his watermelons and cantaloupes. My father agreed with his grandfather that "once the watermelons got ripe they didn't pay any attention to the cantaloupes." Adding the watermelons were "bigger and better than we can raise" in Utah.

My grandfather grew up on this farm and also joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He had very little education, probably only finishing the sixth grade. But he learned how to work from his father. My grandfather, Leo, was seventeen and my grandmother, Iola, sixteen when they were married. They traveled west to find better opportunities, often returning to the south. Eventually they decided they wanted to live near other Mormons. Although they were headed to American Falls, Iola convinced Leo to stop in North Ogden when

1 Bertis L. Embry, Oral History, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1982, transcript, LDS Church Archives, Family History and Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah and Archives and Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 43.

2 Ibid., 41.

3 Ibid., 41-43.
she saw the apricots in bloom. While in Utah Leo "never accumulated much of the worldly goods," but he provided for his family. "He was smart and a very shrewd trader. He bought and sold cows almost all of his life on a shoestring because he did not have enough capital to be able to buy in any large quantities." He also bought and sold fruit, peddling it into Southern Idaho. Whenever I drive through Sardine Canyon to Cache Valley I think of the stories my father told me of the winding road that he and his father used to travel.

My grandmother, Iola, was born on Island 35 in the Mississippi River. Her parents died when she was young, and family members cared for her. Although she married young, she did not want that for her daughters. Iola had a hard life, and she wanted to make things better for her children. She insisted that they go to the dentist once a year even if she had no money to pay him. The dentist knew she would pay. My father recalled his father already had false teeth when he died at age 52 and his mother had false teeth before she was sixty. My father credited his mother that he still had his teeth when he passed away.4

Both Leo and Iola saw value in education and insisted that their children go to school. Five of the six children got college degrees. Erma, my aunt, had health problems that limited her education. Getting advance education was so important that a year after my father returned from his mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the family moved to Logan so that he and my uncle Ralph would not have to pay rent as they attended Utah State University.5 After graduating from college, working in the South, and serving in World War II, my father returned to quiet Cache Valley where he taught at USU and farmed.

My father learned to be a hard worker from his father and his grandfather. And though my father traveled around the world and became well-known as an irrigation engineer, he was the happiest when he was on his tractor.

My grandfather died of leukemia in his fifties; my Uncle Alvin died of Hodgkin's disease when he was about the same age. My father, the next son, worried, but survived that. His other brother dropped dead of a heart attack on the streets of Salt Lake City. My grandmother's greatest fear was that she would not outlive her daughter Erma, and she did. My grandmother died quietly of a stroke. My father had the longest lifespan so far; we call his last years "mystery" time. Although his memory faded, he always had his bright smile and jolly laugh.

The transcript of my interview with my father is one of my valued possessions. He gave me information about his life and about two other generations. His son and grandson can read about their namesakes—my brother Leo James was named after his grandfather and great grandfather and his son is Ryan Leo. Leo and Ryan would have known where their names came from but without the oral history they would not know the stories that went along with the names and the qualities that my parents felt those names represented.

Oral history is used for many reasons. It can be used to help people understand where they have been and empower them to make changes in the present. It can help them understand historical events from common man's point of view. It can add life and stories to movies and film. Equally important are the stories that it gives family members. Oral history makes our ancestors come alive rather than just be bare bones.

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4 Ibid., 35.
5 Ibid., 30.