

# Memory Book Projects

Collecting Stories and Memorabilia

First Edition

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# 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  
October 2002



# What is a Memory Book Project?

A Memory Book Project is a method for collecting stories and recollections from one or more contributors. By using a workbook of memory-jogging questions, participants write down their stories and are urged to share their old photographs and mementos. The workbooks are collected and transcribed. Photos and other images are scanned, and mementos are photographed. The collection is then organized into a book and/or exhibit which can be shared with the community, organization, or family members.

By implementing a Memory Book Project, you have the opportunity to:

- ✧ Gather recollections of your community, organization, or family from elders before the stories are lost forever.
- ✧ Acquire copies of photographs and other memorabilia from personal collections.
- ✧ Make these stories and images readily available to your community or family.
- ✧ Encourage the community or family members to continue collecting and sharing their lifelong experiences.

## WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM A MEMORY BOOK PROJECT?

Although we used the Memory Book workbook format for gathering community memoirs, the same idea can be useful for many kinds of organizations. Some examples include:

- ✧ Neighborhoods
- ✧ Churches
- ✧ Small towns





*“At the end of my junior year I talked my brother into letting me work at a Weber Root Beer stand. He didn’t like the idea much but understood that I needed to make some money. I made enough that summer to buy a coat and school clothes. I had to walk home late at night, about a mile and never felt too threatened. I was paid fifty cents a day and made about that much in tips. That was 8 hours, usually from 3 pm till 11 pm. We were taught too be pleasant and say a lot of pleases and thank yous. Also never put your foot on a running board or hang on cars. Of course young boys didn’t have cars like they do now. I did have one friend who had a car and took me to school some. I didn’t care much for him but Cora Lee liked him, he brought us fresh eggs from his grandfather’s farm.”*

“My friend lives down on the beach and all sorts of things float in. One time her son came running home up from the beach. He said, ‘Look, Mom, what somebody threw away—a perfectly good dead cat.’”

~Gertrude Stevens in  
*Tell Me a Story*

- ☞ Fraternal organizations
- ☞ Clubs and other organizations
- ☞ Families (for reunions, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, etc.)
- ☞ Scouts and other longtime youth organizations
- ☞ Schools (especially when reunion time is approaching)
- ☞ Retirement centers and senior centers
- ☞ Reminiscence groups
- ☞ Veterans organizations

A Memory Book Project can be an excellent complement to an oral history project. Assigning oral historians (whether volunteer or professional) to collect memoirs is an excellent way to save these stories for future generations. In many cases, it is the only way to get the stories of some of your elders. They may not be able or willing to write their stories. Often, when planning an oral history project, it is difficult to limit the number of oral histories you can collect, based on the number of volunteers or the funds or time available. Consider using the workbook method to increase the numbers of stories you receive. See Figure 1-1 on page 10 for a comparison of oral history and Memory Book Projects.

## CONDUCTING A MEMORY BOOK PROJECT

Here is an outline of the steps involved in any Memory Book Project. The chapters listed provide detailed instructions for completing each phase of your project. The complexity of each step depends on the size of your organization, the scope of your topic, the number of contributors, your funding sources, and the desired end product.

1. Form a Memory Book steering committee. *Chapter 3*
2. Determine the theme of your project. *Chapter 2 and Appendix B*
3. Determine the project schedule and locate funding sources. *Chapters 2 and 9*
4. Using your theme as a guide, make a list of potential contributors. *Chapter 3*
5. Create a workbook for contributors to complete. *Chapter 4*
6. Collect the stories and images. Transcribe stories; scan images. *Chapters 6 and 7*
7. Create your Memory Book publication and/or exhibit. *Chapters 7 and 8*

## WHAT NOT TO EXPECT

While the resulting stories and contacts of a Memory Book Project may provide some leads for a researcher to pursue, the project itself is *not* scholarly research. The firsthand accounts, while valuable in themselves, rely almost solely on personal memories and cannot always be relied on to be accurate and factual.

However, it may be useful to use a Memory Book Project to screen for possible candidates for an oral history project. In her master's thesis, *Preserving the Stories of Issaquah: A Memory Book Project*, Megon Noble makes the observation, "Several contributors' memories recorded in the workbook only cover the most elemental information, but leave out critical details. Following up with interviews in a few cases would enhance the overall results of this project."

"Although the Memory Book project is an atypical means of collecting [historical] data, it fits within the typical roles and responsibilities of historical museums....The Memory Book project addresses all these components of the [Issaquah] Historical Society's Mission—to discover, preserve, and disseminate history."

~Megon Noble in her master's thesis:  
*Preserving the Stories of Issaquah: A Memory Book Project*

# Oral History and Memory Book Projects

## A COMPARISON

	ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS	MEMORY BOOK PROJECTS
<b>HISTORICAL ACCURACY</b>	More accurate, if a skilled oral historian is able to ask further questions to clarify and probe for more information “on the spot.”	Depends on the memory and desire of the individual to report incidents accurately.  Contributors can take the time to reflect and look up names, dates, etc.
<b>ACCESSIBILITY</b>	Researchers often must wait until tapes are transcribed or indexed. For many organizations, this can be a lengthy and daunting process—especially when done by volunteers.	The workbook can be read immediately, if necessary, before being transcribed. It is reasonably easy to thumb through workbooks to find relevant data. Transcriptions are usually accomplished sooner (see “Transcription” below).  It is easier to copy pages than tapes.
<b>TRANSCRIPTION</b>	Transcription of tapes requires special equipment and transcribing skills.	Transcription requires the ability to read handwritten material and use a word processor. The number of volunteers available to do this type of transcription is usually higher than for oral transcription.
<b>NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTORS</b>	Limited by the number of trained oral historians available.	Mostly limited by funds. The organization can distribute as many workbooks as they can afford to print. With good follow-up, 40–60% of the workbooks will be returned.
<b>USEFULNESS FOR RESEARCH</b>	In either case, the transcripts should be thoroughly indexed and searchable so relevant information can be easily found by researchers.	
<b>COMPREHENSION</b>	The listener can hear inflections, which add emphasis and provide a better understanding of the interviews.  In some instances, the narrator cannot be easily understood (because of accent, difficulty talking, etc.).	Sometimes handwriting can be difficult to read.  If the story is not punctuated correctly, the author’s meaning may be misunderstood.
<b>FINANCIAL IMPACT</b>	More costly (per contributor) in terms of manpower and funding.	Less costly (per contributor).
<b>COLLECTING STORIES</b>	Interviews must be conducted one-on-one.  Some people are reluctant to write, but enjoy telling their stories to an interviewer.	Stories can be collected in a group setting, with several participants writing together, inspiring one another, and helping each other recall incidents.  Some people are more comfortable writing their stories, rather than telling them, especially with painful memories.  You can easily reach those who do not live locally, increasing your range for collecting material.