

Record Your Family History Before It's Too Late

By Gary L. Calligas

A year ago I was cleaning out a filing cabinet and found a black and white photo taken in 1954 of me as a very young child with my father, Louis. Visible in the background was my uncle Nick Harris getting out of his shiny black 1950 Packard. This photo brought back wonderful memories of leisurely Sunday afternoon drives with the entire family packed into that beautiful car. Sadly, my uncle passed away that June, shortly after the photograph was taken. Finding this photo reminded me how little I actually knew about my uncle.

Following my uncle's death, my aunt Ruby became a recluse and did not share the stories of their past. Until recently all I knew was that my uncle was Greek, born in the later part of the 1800s in Constantinople, Turkey. He emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s, had a restaurant in Miami Beach that was destroyed in a hurricane, and that their marriage was arranged.

Only recently, some 60 years later, I have learned some very interesting facts about Uncle Nick via Google and ancestry searches. But these facts are merely bits and pieces of, what I can only imagine, was a fascinating life story. It would have been wonderful to have had the opportunity to ask questions and record all the details of my uncle's life. I inherited a stickpin that belonged to my uncle that I will one day pass on to one of my sons, but it would have been a far more valuable legacy to my entire family if someone had recorded the details of Uncle Nick's life.

We have all attended gatherings where family members have reminisced about "the old country" or the "good old days" here in the U.S., but how many of us have taken the time to record these stories? Today's readily available technology makes it easy for loved ones to share their stories via video or audio recorders.

I have a friend that interviewed and recorded her grandparents as they recalled memory after memory of their childhoods and married life together. She then transcribed the conversations, and preserved them in a self-published book that she illustrated with old pictures. That year she gave copies of the book to everyone in the family as a Christmas gift. I'm certain that these books will become a treasured family memento for future generations to cherish. For those who are technologically challenged or who need a way to get their loved one to open up about their past, there are a number of fantastic, journal-style books full of thought-provoking questions and space for recording answers.

My own father was born in Romania and had traveled the world as a merchant marine before settling in Tyler, Texas. Fortunately I asked my father to share his story many years before he died in 1987 which I have preserved for my children and grandchildren. Although my mother at age 96 has dementia, she still has remarkable long-term memory and loves to share stories of her childhood. I cherish the time I have been able to spend with her as she recalls one amusing incident after another.

I recently made a presentation at a local retirement community where I encouraged the attendees to write or record their memories. Many seniors eagerly came up to relate a fascinating story about their past. Imagine my delight when several attendees also recounted their experience at my parent's restaurant, The Seven Seas, which was located on Youree Drive in the 1950s and 60s.

Family bonds may not be as strong as they once were due to our mobile society. Knowing where we come from and our family's history strengthens those bonds by imparting a powerful sense of who we are. I challenge each of you to start now to collect those family stories. Preserving family history is a wonderful gift for those we love and for those who will follow.

*Gary L. Calligas is the publisher of **The Best of Times**, a free monthly magazine for mature adults in Northwest Louisiana and is the host of **The Best of Times Radio Hour** which airs at 9:05 am every Saturday on NEWS RADIO 710 KEEL. For more information, please visit www.thebestoftimesnews.com or email gary.calligas@gmail.com.*