

Blueprints for Success

Early APH Members See a Bright Future for Personal History

By Amanda Kuhnert



Fifteen years ago, a handful of professional personal historians joined Kitty Axelson-Berry in her newly founded Association of Personal Historians. Amanda Kuhnert spoke with several of these early APH members about how their businesses have evolved since their discovery of APH.



Pat Kuessner
Ann Arbor, Michigan
Member since 1997
Thistle-down Memory
Keeper, LLC
Pat specializes in writing
and publishing life
story books and leads a
workshop called “Your
Life as Story.”

Starting Out

In 1997, Pat Kuessner was introduced to the idea of starting a personal history business by a friend who stumbled upon the APH Web site while surfing the Internet. “I thought that [personal history] would be a good retirement business,” she says. Pat had recently retired after twenty-two years of teaching English to high school and college students.

Shortly thereafter, she attended her first APH conference in Atlanta. “I had a [business] plan developing in my mind, but I needed to fill in the blanks,” Pat says. Attending the conference helped her do just that.

Getting the Word Out

Pat’s first clients were contacts made through her involvement in the community—working in the church store and taking a jazz class. “You stumble along

through life, and you mention the things that you’re interested in wherever there’s an opening,” she says. Her involvement in networking groups, such as the American Association of University Women, has also provided her with opportunities to educate community members about her business.

Pat also teaches life story workshops, and although most of the participants in her classes are not in the market to hire a professional, she has gained a few referrals that way. “You never know who’s in the group and whom they know,” she says.

A Memorable Project

Pat laughs when she tells the story of when, early in her personal history career, she completed a consultation with a woman who had contacted her about doing her father’s life history. At the end of their meeting, the woman surprised her by saying, “I’d really like you to do my dog.”

Pat spent the rest of the summer interviewing the client about her dog, and when she submitted the first draft for the woman to review, Pat was thrown for another loop when her client requested that the story be written in verse.

“Forget dear old dad; he never did get his story,” Pat says. But over the course of their working relationship, she wrote four rhyming children’s books about various animals that were special in some way to her client.

Why APH?

Although Pat's business is well established, she continues to turn to fellow APH members for professional advice. "When I get stuck on something, I have 500 friends to ask," she says, referring to the APH Listserv.

What It Takes

To be successful in the personal history business, Pat feels that you must be authentic, flexible, and an excellent listener. "You have to really care about your client, and if you don't, then you should just let it go and let someone else do the job," she says.

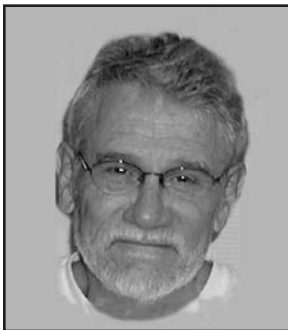
The Future of the Field

Pat is optimistic. "I think that there's business to be had," she says, and she emphasizes community involvement as the best way to reach potential clients. "Whatever you do [in the community], it should be a true interest—not for personal gain. I loved my work in the church store with all of my heart."

Moving Forward

Over the past twelve years, Pat's publishing company, Bokmal Press, has published more than two dozen memoirs, including a few children's books. At the age of 75, Pat toys with the idea of retiring from her "retirement career," but projects seem to keep rolling in.

Although Pat attended nine consecutive APH conferences, she hasn't been to one since 2005. The location of the 2010 conference (in Victoria, B.C.), has reignited her interest in participating. "I'm already planning on attending," she says.



Charley Kempthorne
Manhattan, Kansas
Member since 1996
LifeStory Institute
Charley offers workshops
in writing personal
histories and publishes
a monthly newsletter,
LifeStory.

Starting Out

After completing his MFA in Creative Writing in the 1960s, Charley Kempthorne began teaching at The University of Wisconsin. But, in 1971, he left the comforts of a tenured position in academia to return to his home state of Kansas and become a farmer. Several

years (and several children) later, he took a part-time job as a GED teacher. Finding this work less than stimulating, Charley brewed up the idea of teaching an autobiographical writing class for seniors through the school district.

"This may have been one of the first reminiscence classes in the country," he says. "My class consisted of about nine or ten purple-headed little old ladies. We met weekly, and I got them writing."

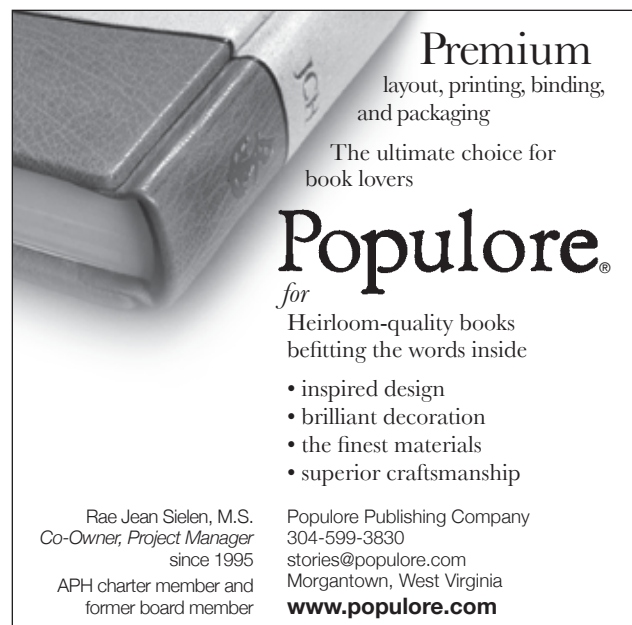
One of his students, Jessie Lee Brown Foveaux, "began writing 5,000 words a week on a tablet," Charley remembers. "Through her writing, she opened up a whole life that had been buried." Two hundred and eighty pages later, Charley helped Ms. Foveaux get the book typed and copied for her family. At his request, she donated a copy to the local library and gave one to Charley.

Getting the Word Out

"I learned early on that if I could get people in the news business to write, speak, and interview me about my business, then I'd get more [newsletter] subscribers," Charley says. He succeeded in this "free PR" endeavor and was soon featured in local and regional newspapers.

A Memorable Project

In 1997, the story of his business caught the eye of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Clare Ansberry. Learning



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about Ms. Foveaux's book in an interview with Charley, Ansberry asked to see a copy.

Within months of Ms. Foveaux's story appearing in the *Wall Street Journal*, the 97-year-old author had a \$1 million book deal, and Charley was being interviewed on *Good Morning America* and featured in *People Magazine*.

Why APH?

"I joined APH in 1996, because I knew everyone who was in it," Charley says. Early in his career as a personal historian, he connected with Bob Joyce, an enthusiastic member of APH and "an organizing genius," he fondly recalls.

"Over the years, I've led a couple of workshops at the APH conventions, which was helpful in letting people know about me and, more importantly, allowed me to get to know more about them," he says.

What It Takes

Running a personal history business requires "relentlessness," Charley says. "You've just got to keep doing it." He adds that it's easier to stick with something you believe in. "For me, it's become the meaning of my professional life. Life-story work is a mission for me."

As for the characteristics of successful personal historians, Charley emphasizes the importance of learning to listen, as well as developing editing and writing know-how. He also learned early on that his job was to be a "coach," rather than a teacher. "They started teaching me; I've learned so much from my students."

The Future of the Field

"Membership [of APH] has gone from 5 people to over 600. That, itself, gives you an idea." He points out the vast number of mediums for recording life history now represented in the association, including digital recording and videography. "There are all of these new young people [in the organization]," he says. "It's great!"

Moving Forward

In 1991, Charley started *LifeStory*, a monthly newsletter for writers of family history, memoirs, and autobiography. Today, the newsletter is celebrating more than 100 issues. His book, *For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History*, was published commercially in 1997. "It has helped me greatly because it's in 2,000 public libraries in the U.S.," he says. Ten years later, in 2007, he published his first novel, *Gary's Luck*.

Over the course of his career, Charley has offered life-story workshops in more than twenty-five states and Canada. "My workshops focus on teaching [my students] how to write scenes from their lives, with the hope that they'll go forward to write beaucoup scenes from their life and the lives of their parents and grandparents," he says.



Joella Werlin

Portland, Oregon
Member since 1995
Famitore

Joella produces personal, professional, and family histories.

Starting Out

In 1993, Joella Werlin retired after seventeen years as director of public affairs and community relations for the Portland ABC-TV affiliate. She had other professional plans in mind for this new chapter of life, but through "a combination of serendipity and enterprise," Joella soon found herself at the helm of a personal history business.

She attended Charlie Morrissey's Oral History course at Portland State University in 1994. "Studying methods of doing oral history was very helpful to me because it gave me a professional perspective as to what working with individuals and community organizations would be like," Joella says.

Initially, Joella thought that the mainstay of her business would be documenting family possessions and the stories that went along with them, but she quickly moved away from that business model when she realized how difficult it was to find clients willing to pay for the time involved.

Getting the Word Out

Due to her many years of involvement in the community, Joella's business grew organically through word-of-mouth marketing. "You need to establish your own place in the community," she says. "Draw on your background and interests; join civic organizations that you want to engage with."

A Memorable Project

“I’ve had a wide variety of clients,” she says. One of Joella’s career highlights came after she completed a personal history for the daughter of late composer Ernest Bloch. In 1997, Joella was asked to present a paper at a conference honoring Bloch in Cambridge, England.

Why APH?

Joella joined APH in 1997, after being contacted by APH member Donna Kenny, and she attended her first conference less than a year later in Santa Ana, California. “There I met Kitty Axelson-Berry, founder of APH, who showed me a grand vision for where creative enterprise might lead,” she says.

“The network, friendships, and interaction with others who have plowed this new professional territory of personal history have been indispensable for me,” she says. “I have benefited from a lot of know-how from colleagues, especially in technical or managerial situations. APH friends are ready and generous listeners when I have come up against client problems or during tough personal times.”

What It Takes

“The narrator must like and trust you, and know that you’re going to honor her privacy and the person that she is,” Joella explains. “It’s about respect, rapport, ethics, and confidentiality.” She also notes the importance of a personal historian’s historical orientation. “I’m always drawing on my own education.”

The Future of the Field

“I think that this is a growing area,” says Joella. “The economy feels like a pinch, but I think that one of the things that’s changing in terms of the future of this business is that we’re all looking at possessions as ephemera.”

Joella feels that individuals are looking for more tangible ways to remember and honor their loved ones’ lives. “I think this is a business that more people are appreciating,” she says. “More people are going to try and do it themselves and then realize that they need help.”

Blueprints, continued on p. 22...

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Moving Forward

The look and feel of Joella's books has evolved over time. Her first books were more faithful to the oral history tradition; the final transcripts read more like a Q&A, were printed at Kinkos, and were coil-bound. Today, Joella's products are edited to read like a narrative and printed to resemble a commercial book, typically produced in hardcover or high-quality paperback. She envisions retirement somewhere on the horizon, but the projects seem to keep lining up ahead of her. "I love it," she says.

Amanda Kuhnert is a professional copyeditor and writer in Stowe, Vermont. Her company, Fourfold Press (and its subsidiary, Fourfold Legacy Services), provides proofreading, copyediting, copywriting, and personal history services to individuals, families, businesses, and communities.

...Grammar Corner, continued from page 15

5. She wore mauve gloves to *complement* her outfit; I felt *envious* of her remarkable good looks.
- "To complement," means "to complete"; we might "compliment" (praise) her.
 - I "envy" you for having something I wish I had; I feel "jealous" if I fear I am losing something (or someone) I feel is mine to you.
6. I'm Too Young to Be Sick!

My Crow Is a Black Bird—I'll Sing You It's Song

- The most frequent error I see in personal history titles is a tendency to lower-case all small words, period. Many small words should be capitalized: "Too" here, because it's in a place of emphasis; "Be" because all verbs and helping verbs in titles are capitalized; "Is" because it's a verb; and "You" because all pronouns are capitalized.
- "Black Bird" should be two words, because a crow is black, but not a blackbird (a specific but different type of bird).
- "Its" is the possessive; "it's" means "it is."

Pat McNees (www.patmcnees.com) was a book editor (Harper & Row and Fawcett) before becoming an independent journalist, writer, and editor (www.writersandeditors.com). You'll find more links to helpful explanations of grammar here: www.writersandeditors.com/style_grammar_diction_57354.htm.

I Built a Web Site and Nobody Came

By Nancy Heifferon

"If you build it, they will come." The line from the novel and movie Field of Dreams has become iconic. This may be true for baseball fields, but not for Web sites.

If your business has a Web site, how do you get people to find it? One way is to write articles and submit them to article directories on the Internet. This can be free, except for the time it takes. Readers of your articles may be inspired to go to your Web site, giving you self-qualified visitors—people who are looking for a business like yours or who are at least curious.

When you submit articles to directory sites, they can be reused by other sites, while you retain authorship. The upside: more links from other Web sites to yours and a possible boost to your search engine page rank. The downside: you have no control over who uses your article.

If you decide to write and publish articles, here are a few tips:

- Include a link to your Web site. That's obvious.
- Use an intriguing "signature" or bio to entice readers to check out your Web site.
- Don't pay for a service that blasts your article to the hundreds or thousands of existing article sites. Google may consider you a spammer. Instead, submit to four or five favorite article sites and a few niche sites.
- Some article submission sites require unique content, which means you may not submit the same article to other sites.

Use Alexa (www.alexa.com/siteinfo) to find the most popular article submission sites and directories. Enter "article directory, article submission" in the keyword box to get a list of sites. Click on a site name to get its traffic rank, the number of sites linking in, reviews, and more. Top ranked article directories when I searched recently were, in order:

1. EzineArticles.com
2. ArticlesBase
3. GoArticles.com
4. Associated Content
5. Article Dashboard
6. ArticleRich
7. ArticleClick