



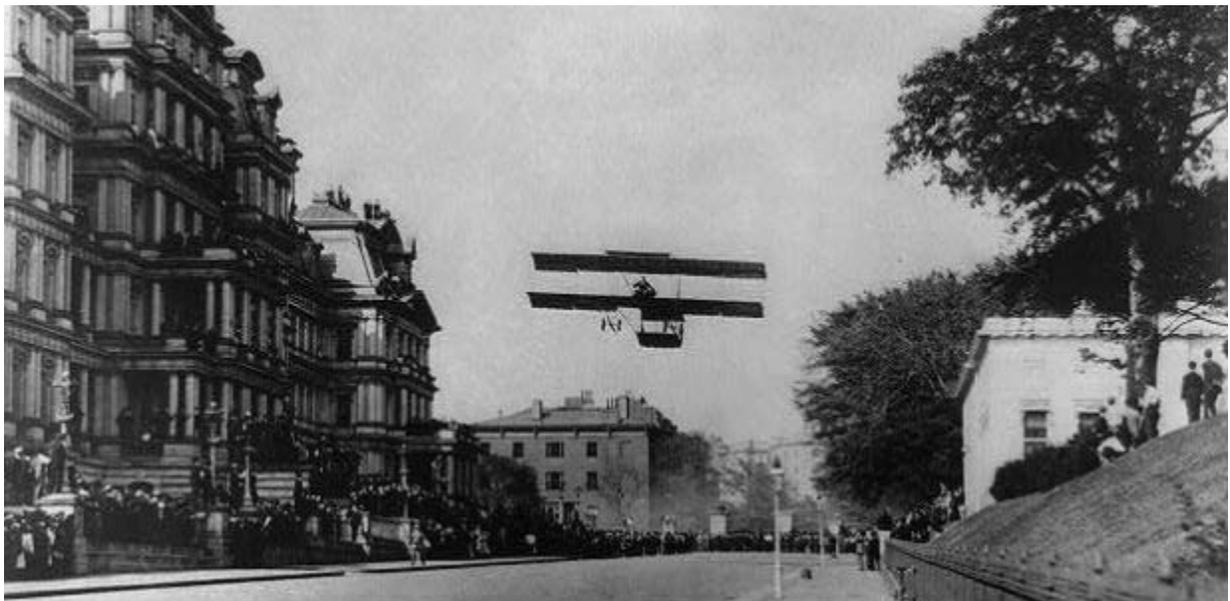
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Memories Lost: A Son's Regret

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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We have the technology to easily capture -- through sight and sound -- the parents and grandparents on whose shoulders we all stand. Don't wait too long.



My father, who was 98 years old, died recently. We were close friends for decades, and I have no regrets about our relationship.

Well, I do have one -- and that regret may apply to many of us. I never sat down with a video camera and recorded his memories from a life that began on February 10, 1914, six months before World War I.

My father (and my mother, who was born on March 16, 1913 and died at nearly 97) lived through an extraordinary century. Like many parents, they had wonderful stories: about growing up, about their family and friends, about their work. And many of our parents, regardless of their station in life, were also witnesses to some important part of

the social, economic, political and cultural history of America -- and, perhaps, of the nation from which they emigrated. Some of my father's included:

Watching the troops march back to a Northern Wisconsin town, with the local band blaring and the soldiers singing "Over There," after the Great War ended. Having his grandfather shoot one "n" off the name Heinemann (to Heineman) because of anti-German sentiment in World War I-era America. Learning to fly a biplane in the twenties, taking off from a roughly mown farm field at the age of fourteen. Hearing the news in 1930 that his father had lost all the family money in stock market speculation and committed suicide. Driving from the University of Michigan to the University of Chicago for a blind date with a beautiful young woman who later became his wife. Taking her on a first "official" date that he couldn't afford to the Palmer House in Chicago for dancing with big band music -- and spilling a drink down her new velvet dress.

Beginning work as a young lawyer for \$125 a week in the middle of the Depression -- a large sum at the time. Abandoning the rock-ribbed, Midwest Republicanism of his father to become a staunch Roosevelt Democrat. Admiring my mother who, as a young social worker, climbed high in the tenements of Chicago to help the poor find medical care.

All these reminiscences -- my father grew up in a lost world of milk wagons, and Model Ts, and party phone lines, and house calls by doctors wearing hats and carrying black bags -- and many more were about the period before 1940 and the coming of World War II. And he lived 70 years more!

Many condolence notes to me said that my parents would live on in my memory -- and I have written similar notes expressing the hope that the "miracle of memory" would provide solace at a time of loss and then far into the future.

Yet our memories as children are incomplete, and our recollections of once-vivid parental stories may fade -- and our children are yet further removed, and our grandchildren may never know much at all about their great-grandparents. I don't, even though my great-grandparents were remarkable people who came to America from Germany in the mid-19th century.

With the methods of recording these family histories now readily available, we can capture with sight and sound those on whose shoulders we and our children and our children's children stand. In the future, we could learn so much more about who we are -- in a very personal and powerful way -- by visiting, through the medium of film, those who have gone before.

Beyond the enormous value of such histories in each family's march of the generations, our histories may have larger significance. In the 20th century, the great field of social history was created by such pioneering scholars as Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. and Oscar Handlin, who told the story of America through its people, not just through its elites. So, too, people who have experienced epoch-making events have profound stories to tell. An example is found in the thousands of testimonies of Holocaust survivors given on

film and collected by the USC Shoah Foundation Institute. One grandchild of Holocaust survivors, Sara Greenberg, used interview footage from this archive to make a moving film, "B-2247: A Granddaughter's Understanding," which is stimulating other grandchildren to make films about survivors who are still alive. Similar projects exist or are possible about the great social and political movements in 20th-century America.

Several years ago, my son, a talented documentary filmmaker, convinced my parents to sit in front of a camera for 20 minutes and talk a bit about their generation. They told the story about my dad asking my mother's father for her hand. Her father had not gone to college (though he had helped all his brothers and sister do so), but spent every evening buried in a book, barely noticing what went on around him. When my father asked the question, his future father-in-law said: "Don't you think Phyllis [my mother's 16-year-old sister] is a little too young?" and then, without saying more, turned back to his book. As they told this story, my parents looked at each other with smiles ripened by age that you had to see to feel.

How many other stories could we have filmed had I (or my son) taken the time?

Many of you will understand my sense of loss because you have experienced something very similar. Hopefully, you will also understand my regret -- and do what I failed to do. Create a family history if your parents are still with you, a history that will be a powerful testament for generations to come and for purposes that we may not know.

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/08/memories-lost-a-sons-regret/261335/>