

# Using Video to Tell Today's Story

Highland Family History Fair

Last Revision: 28 January 2007

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## Executive Summary

Family history, when captured in stories, can be much broader than just vital statistics. We all like to be story-listeners but (for the benefit of future generations) we must also be story-tellers. Using video as a medium for telling stories affords us a richness in expression that wasn't possible until recently. Being skilled with a video camera and computer is less important than having compelling subject matter, and future generations will find stories about their ancestors to be sufficiently compelling to overcome deficiencies in our skills with technology. A little planning (including picking a theme) before shooting video clips can make for an easier and more successful effort. Preservation is a significant challenge to using video as a vehicle for telling stories; having a data-migration strategy is important. Recommendations are made for equipment (hardware and software), and suggestions are given in the spirit of encouragement.

## Introduction

There is a bit of irony in using a textual-based form of communication to attempt to tell the story of using video to tell stories. This document is meant to provide a general overview of what is covered in the class and, in its printed form, it will have margins in which to take notes. I will not "read" this document in class, focusing instead on the more demonstrable parts of the story. So, while this document tells part of the story, the more complete story is conveyed in the class. It would be optimal to read this document before coming to the class.

## Family History through Family Stories

Clearly, names, dates, and places are a big part of genealogy, and we like to get that information whenever we can. This kind of data — whether on a pedigree chart or a family group sheet, or even written in a book — is useful for knowing *about* someone, but doesn't go very far in helping us *know* someone. When it comes to our ancestors, we want to know them better. What experiences did they have? What were their talents, hopes and passions? What made them happy? How did they like to spend their free time? These are the kinds of things we can learn through stories. These are the things which help us to know our families, our strengths, our weaknesses, and ourselves. These are the things which bind the hearts of children to fathers and mothers.

We all enjoy being story-listeners, being on the receiving end of such stories. Of course, in order for us to have such stories, *someone* had to be the author — the story-teller. It is

not much of a stretch to think that our children and their children (and so on) will want stories of their ancestors, and we will be their ancestors. *Someone* will have to write our story. Some people will be famous or rich, and other people will write their stories for them. For the rest of us, we will have to be the authors of our stories. We need to be story-tellers.

## Video as a Storytelling Medium

Great stories are told through letters, journals, memoirs, life sketches, obituaries, newspaper articles, scrapbooks, slides and photographs. These forms of communication can tell us a lot, and answer many of the questions we may have, but there are limits to what they can tell us. What was their personality like — were they humorous, happy, confident, gentle, charismatic? What did they look like? What did they sound like? We may not think (or even dare) to ask these kinds of questions because we are not likely to get very satisfying answers from the traditional “static” forms of communication.

Some of us are lucky enough to have home movies (film or video) from our childhood, and these provide insights and details that we couldn’t get otherwise. A video can be a multi-media presentation which adds movement to our photographs and voices (sound) to our text.

Today, we have new ways of publishing our stories, including e-mail, web sites, “blogs”, e-cards, instant-messaging, CDs, and DVDs. Advances in technology — particularly video and computer technology — are giving us more options than our ancestors had, and that technology is becoming more and more accessible (usable and affordable). Amazing video cameras can be had for as little as a few hundred dollars! Especially in the last few years, average computer-buying consumers have had the ability to produce DVDs that tell the stories of our families and our lives.

As we embrace the role of story-teller, we (and our progeny) will be well served by including video as one of our storytelling media.

## Telling a Story with Video

A story gives us an account of an event or a series of events. A *good* story is one that has an audience. This can be the result of either (1) having a skilled storyteller, or (2) having compelling subject matter. Ideally, we would like to incorporate both good storytelling *and* compelling subject matter, but even just having the compelling subject matter is often enough to make it a good story — particularly for our audiences.

Video storytelling skills range from fundamental (knowing how to operate the equipment) to high-end (in the league of Spielberg, Lucas, and beyond). The fundamental skills are fairly easy to obtain, and the user interfaces of the hardware and software are continually improving so that more people can use the equipment

effectively. This is sufficient for a start. With experience (and study), your skills will improve over time as you learn from others (as well your own successes and failures). Fortunately, when telling stories about your family, you have a built-in audience (your family and progeny) who are keenly interested in the subject matter. The bottom line is this: get the equipment, learn how to use it at a basic level, and then start using it. Even if your results aren't perfect, it won't matter much to the intended audience, because they are much more interested in the subject matter than in how fancy you are with the camera or computer.

When possible, do some planning on what story you are going to tell before you start shooting video clips. With planning, the final result will look much more cohesive and convincing than shooting a bunch of video clips and then trying to put together a story based on what you have. Having said that, don't use the lack of planning as an excuse to not tell a story; it will be harder to put together a good story without the planning, but it is still quite possible (and valuable).

Part of planning involves picking a single theme for the story. With planning, that theme might be something like "musical performances of the Broekhuijsen family members during the holiday season", and I would make special effort to attend (and tape!) the choir concerts for each of my older three kids, the madrigal dinner of my daughter, and the piano recital for each of my three sons, and the resulting DVD would last about an hour. Without planning, I might find that I don't have a musical performance involving my youngest child, or I might have to make my theme less focused (like "things some of my kids did during the last 6 months"); the latter is still worth doing, but the former is more satisfying.

The selection of a theme can also be an effective (albeit indirect) way of interviewing someone. Here's an example: Rather than setting up the tripod in front of a couple of chairs, and then having me and my mom sit down and go through a list of questions, I chose to make "Oma's Art" the theme of the story. After she was done raising her children, my Mom took up watercolor as a medium of expressing her thoughts and ideas. We have some of her paintings in our home, but her house is full of such works. Through these paintings, she is telling a story of her life. Each painting is a chapter in that story, and she has much to say about why she painted it, what were the challenges (physical and emotional), and the degree to which she succeeded in conveying her thoughts, emotions, and memories in that painting. Shooting the video was pretty simple. I just followed Mom around the house as she went from painting to painting, telling the story one chapter at a time. I went back, after capturing the video, to take still pictures (with a digital camera) of each of the paintings, and use these pictures in the final video (in place of parts of the video in the clips) while keeping her audio track playing. The planning did not go very deep (I didn't know much of what she would say, or even what paintings she would talk about), but I knew that I wanted to make a story about her art, and that was sufficient planning in this case.

That brings up a few other significant points. First, you can add still pictures, textual titles, music, and separate audio tracks to your final video — not all the video you present

need be shot in your video camera. Second, the content you present (whether they be video clips, or still pictures) can be shot out of sequence (not in the same chronological order as that you present them). Third, editing (both cutting out and adding in) can have a huge impact on the flow of your final video. New software is readily available that allows you to mix and edit multiple forms of media into a final video.

## Challenges to Using and Preserving Video

Of course, just “telling” the story is only part of the challenge. We then have to find a way to preserve that story for future generations. This latter part of the challenge has two areas of concern: preserving the media, and preserving the technology to “play” the media.

Media preservation is a big concern in family history, regardless of what media is involved. Older “paper-based” media have been under scrutiny for generations, and we’ve learned a lot about how to archive them. For example, we know to look for acid-free (or at least pH-buffered) materials when matting and framing, or printing photographs, or making scrapbooks, and that by so-doing we can preserve such artifacts for perhaps hundreds of years. Video technology is a relative new-comer, and is seldom reduced to paper (where we know what to do to preserve it). The storage media for video and other digital/computer data are most often magnetic (tape, floppy disc, Zip disc, hard disc) and optical (CD, DVD, and magneto-optical). Magnetic media is not particularly good for long-term storage as the magnetic fields tend to fade (or bleed), and are vulnerable to radiation, magnetic fields, heat, and oxidation. Optical media can be much better than magnetic media, but it still isn’t archival; the CDRs and DVDRs that we “burn” on our home computers have a lifetime ranging from a few months (especially if we label them with Sharpie pens) to a few years. Magneto-optical discs, once regarded as the best long-term choice, had an estimated life of 25 years. We’re nowhere close to being able to preserve video media as long as paper-based media.

Technology preservation ought to be as big a concern as media preservation — especially for video. Whereas paper-based media usually have a physical form which is “human readable” (that is, viewable with our eyes and without the aid of technology), video is currently technology-dependent. It does us no good to preserve video media if we don’t have the technology available to “play” that media. As a case-in-point, I have journal files that I wrote 24 years ago on an Atari 800 computer, complete with the word-processor “Atari-Writer”, and stored on 5.25” floppy disks. I no longer have a way to view that data. While I have that computer in my closet, I can’t get it to turn on anymore; I don’t have a floppy drive for that computer, and I don’t have Atari-Writer software which is needed to interpret the format of the files. These journal entries are effectively lost to me — even though I have the original floppies (and assume that they still hold the data). These are the same kinds challenges that we face with video.

These are not insignificant challenges. The best we can do now is employ a data migration strategy — periodically transferring/copying our data files onto new media,

with new computers. This concept applies to all digital media (including video, photographs, textual documents, etc.) and is discussed further in my other class, “Dealing with Photographs in a Digital Age”.

## Tool Recommendations

### Video Camera

- Go digital. Some have S-video connectors and allow transfer of analog video to digital — nice feature if you have an existing analog camera and tapes.
- MiniDV format (tape) is still a good choice — extremely prevalent and relatively inexpensive. DVDR is becoming more available, but not quite as good an image quality. HDD (Hard Disc Drive) is also becoming more available, but the data format is not yet supported by a wide range of video editing software.
- Small enough that you will take it with you when you go places. Large enough to have the quality and features you want.
- Low-light capabilities. Usually closely related to the sensor size (expressed as 1/x.y, where x.y is a measurement in inches (example: 1/4.7”), with the larger sensor being better. This varies a lot from camera to camera, so do your homework (read reviews – [www.camcorderinfo.com](http://www.camcorderinfo.com) is a good source of reviews and other useful information).
- 3-CCD cameras will generally have better color, better low-light capabilities, and be more expensive.
- Widescreen (16:9) instead of standard (4:3) – Nice if the intended audience has widescreen capabilities (either on computer or TV); otherwise, you get black bars on top and bottom of screen. Of course, if the audience has widescreen, and you give them standard, they will get black bars on left and right of screen.
- Optical image stabilization; this will eliminate a lot of the shake in hand-held clips.
- HD (High-Definition) is coming down in price. Gives more resolution and better picture, but it won’t make a difference if you produce only standard definition DVDs.
- Highest range of optical zoom; digital zoom is more pixelated (less sharp).
- External microphone with foam windscreen (or “dead cat”); better sound, less wind noise, and less motor noise from the camera.

### Tripod

- Use whenever camera will be in a fixed location (even if in different orientations) for more than a few seconds (example: music performance); no shake and much better for transitions.
- Fluid tripod head; will make pans much smoother.
- Geared tripod head if you can afford it; will make smoothest pans.

## **Computer**

- As fast as you can afford. Video processing will challenge your computer far more than e-mail, web-surfing, word-processing, spreadsheets, or even photo processing.
- Lots of RAM. 2 GB is not too much!
- Large hard disk drive(s). An hour of video from the camera can be 13 GB; the project file may be more than 20 GB. External drives might be a good alternative if your computer is maxed-out on internal drives.
- Large monitor — physical size and resolution. 24” – 30” is not too big!
- DVD (4.7 GB) burner — the faster the better. Dual-layer (8.5 GB) is nice, but the media is still pretty expensive.
- Blue Ray (25 GB), HDDVD (15 GB) — Requires new DVD players, but offers much more capacity than standard DVDs. Also come in dual-layer options (50 GB and 30 GB, respectively). Some new movies are being made available in either Blue Ray, HDDVD, or both. The promise is alluring — huge data storage capacity. However, there is currently a format war between these Blue Ray and HDDVD. I recommend waiting some months to see how that war settles out before spending money on one of these formats. For more information on these formats, search Wikipedia for “Blue Ray”.

## **Software**

- Look for an integrated suite of applications that can do editing of video and sound clips and photos, and can create playable DVDs.
- iLife’06 (including iMovie, iDVD) is a great suite and a complete solution for Macintosh; it comes free with every new Mac and is otherwise \$80 well-spent. iLife’07 should be out in the next few months.
- More “professional” apps like Final Cut Express and Pro are more expensive and have a steeper learning curve, but will be very good if you outgrow the capabilities of iMovie.

- Photo-editing, like iPhoto (okay), or Photoshop Elements (better), or Photoshop (best). See also new workflow programs such as Adobe Lightroom (for Mac or Windows, currently in publicly available (and stable) beta), and Apple's Aperture (Mac-only).
- Music-browsing, like iTunes (free!)

## **Media**

- MiniDV tapes
- An 8-pack of the 1-hour tapes can be found at COSTCO for \$20.
- Stick with the same brand of tapes; lubricant differences between brands can cause problems.
- Use them once-only. Erasure may not be complete and you want to keep your "master" copy of the video clips.
- Recordable DVDs — DVD-R most compatible with home DVD players.
- Buy the best (it doesn't pay to be cheap here).
- Taiyo Yuden is a good choice, usually less than 50¢ each in quantity.

## **Random Smattering of Suggestions**

- Don't trust hard drives for long-term storage; every hard drive will eventually fail — it is a matter of "when" not "if". Save projects to DVDs and/or back-up to tapes (can even go back through the video camera to MiniDV tape).
- Make multiple copies of final DVDs, and distribute them geographically.
- More likely that at least one will survive fire, flood, earthquake, divorce, etc.
- Plan to migrate data every 2-3 years. Even if this means copying a DVD onto another DVD.
- Rewind your raw, master, and back-up tapes once per year, to reduce bleed-through.
- When shooting video of music performances, leave the camera recording through an entire song. Even if the visual is less than exciting, you will have the whole song against which to put other visual content (like photographs). Cutting a song short can be jarring, and is best done later, at the computer, when you optimally time it.

- Don't let inexperience get in the way. You don't have to be an expert to get valuable results.
- Don't procrastinate. Kids are only getting older and bigger, and voices change. Grandparents are passing on. You can't go back and recapture that which was missed.

## More Help

Buying a video camera can be a daunting task, especially with new models coming out so frequently. You can learn a lot by going to web sites such as [www.camcorderinfo.com](http://www.camcorderinfo.com) and reading reviews and tutorials.

There are a number of books and online articles from which you can learn how to improve your techniques. I'm particularly impressed with "The Missing Manual" series by David Pogue. In particular, I have read and really like his "iMovie HD & iDVD 5" book which, while talking about Macintosh software in particular, also presents a lot of material that is computer platform-agnostic. I also recently came across a text by Diana Weynand, "Final Cut Express HD: Digital Video Editing for Everyone", which does a masterful job of teaching how to use Apple's Final Cut Express HD software.

There is far more information available on the preservation of digital media (the stuff on which we store our videos). I cover some of that in another class, "Dealing with Photographs in a Digital Age", and I am also adding related material weekly to [www.YoSemiTek.com](http://www.YoSemiTek.com).