

THE END OF RECORDED HISTORY AS WE KNOW IT

Documents and photographs are among the most prized possessions of many families, historical societies and museums. A researcher can use newspaper articles, letters, postcards, photographs, journals, business ledgers and court records to create an exact picture of what life was like at a specific point in time.

I have been working with historical societies for over 20 years. In that time I have noticed that historical documentation began declining in the 70's and has continued to decline each year. If you go to any Historical Society you will find significantly more documentation of the 1880s and 90s than the 1980s and 90s. Recorded history of the 2000-2010 era is almost nonexistent.

To what do we owe this loss of recorded history? The answer is the one thing that was expected to save history forever, the digital age. Let's take a look at what has happened to recorded history. Before the introduction of E-mail, cell phones, texting, Facebook, My-Space and Twitter people actually wrote to each other. Most museums have examples of the most beautiful cursive handwriting. Today many schools no longer teach cursive writing. E-mail and texting are the written letters of today. Digital media provide instant communication; however, they are instantly gone. The exception to the instantly gone rule is when you post something you regret! It will take on a life of its own.

In the past many people kept journals documenting the events of their day. These journals provide tremendous insight into what was going on during that period in time. Facebook, My-Space and Twitter are the Journals of today. Unfortunately they are instantly gone forever. Because of social media we are losing the ability to communicate face to face. The digitizing of legal documents has resulted in a tremendous loss of recorded history. The old ledgers, bills and receipts contained a wealth of hand written information above and beyond the basic data needed. Today everything is fill-in the form. There is no room for comments or additional information. In many cases a store's computer orders merchandise from the manufacture's computer with no human intervention. With government retention rules most of this data is destroyed after a period of time.

Newspapers are suffering today because most news is delivered via the internet and cell phones. This is great for instant news but it does nothing to preserve news for historical purposes. A newspaper has births, deaths, local news and event coverage at a level you will never find on the internet. Our local newspaper has a section titled "*Reflections of the Past*". This is the highlights of the news for the past 150 years in 10-year increments. I have noticed there is more detailed information for 150 years ago than 10 years ago.

Most historical societies have a nice collection of historic photographs, however, few after 1970. In the 1970s

and 80s the Polaroid camera and 35mm slides were the media of choice. Polaroid photos faded away and 35mm slides were difficult to convert to photos. Because slide projectors are no longer made many people throw their slides away versus converting to other media. Movie cameras came into vogue in the 1970 and 80's. There were 8mm and 16mm cameras. Today it is impossible to find a projector. The next phase was the large VCR cameras. The VCR camera was replaced by the smaller 30-minute VCR. Next were the movie cameras with the small disks. Now all movie cameras are digital. How many of you have old family movies that you can no longer view?

Development of the digital camera has had an even more devastating effect on recorded history. Almost everyone now has a digital camera. Most cell phones take digital photographs. This has led to millions of photographs being taken each year. Where are these photographs? Most are still in the camera or on the computer. I would estimate that less than 1% of digital photographs are ever printed out or shared. What happens when your computer crashes? Your photos are gone forever. Having worked with computers for over 40 years, I know that the storage media of today will be different in 5 years.

The digital age has given us amazing opportunities to document and capture our world. The problem is it is instantly captured - then instantly gone. Our parents and grand-parents passed their legacy to us through letters, photographs, diaries, and family records.

What are we going to pass on to our children?

When people are asked the question, "If your house were on fire what is the one thing you would save?" the answer is almost unanimous, "I would save my family photographs and papers". In this digital age what would you save? If you have documents and photographs, please share them with the genealogy societies, libraries and historical societies.

DANNY BACK

dback@earthlink.net

Greetings from Ohio River Mile 519.4