



BEYOND STORYTELLING

Local author Louise Hawker uses her passion for history to help clients write their life stories.

by Tor Hanson, for The Bulletin Special Projects / Photos by Kevin Prieto

As the Greatest Generation is approaching the sunset years, many are thinking about the legacy they want to leave behind. For some, the task of recording their life story to pass on to generations to come is daunting. While memories may be vivid, and the stories easy to tell, capturing them in written format is often more difficult than anticipated.

Experienced writer and editor, Louise Hawker, has dedicated the past two years to helping people gather their life stories and turn them into books.

Sitting comfortably in Nancy Watts' living room, Hawker listens intently as Watts shares her memories, retelling endless stories of a life well lived. A digital voice recorder situated on the table ensures that every detail Watts recalls as she revisits her life's experiences can be recounted when eventually the two weave the stories into a written memoir.

"Nancy recalls her life in vivid

memories and has a remarkable talent for remembering dates and names," said Hawker.

Watts was born in the late 1920s, and remembers living through the Great Depression and World War II. She grew up in Hot Springs, Arkansas, during the era of Jim Crow laws — local laws that enforced racial segregation in the southern United States. Racial tensions and prejudice had such a grip on most of the country at that time, that Hot Springs was quite literally divided down the middle of the main road.

"The white people lived on one side of the street, the black on the other side of the street, and the two did not mix," explained Watts.

Watts recalled a wealthy African-American woman named Annie Boone, who ended up living on the "white side" of the racial divide. Boone is one of many larger-than-life characters who is featured in Watts' upcoming book.

"I love characters, and have met so many over the course of my

life," said Watts.

Watts' father left when she was just 1 year old and she was raised by her mother and grandmother.

"[We] lived in this little unpainted, two-room clapboard shack," said Watts. "I was curious about Annie because she lived on the same side as the whites. Annie had the nicest house on that side. She had a white-painted, two-story house with a beautiful yard with trees and roses."

Her outgoing spirit and her love of other children prompted 5-year-old Watts to befriend Boone.

"[My family] didn't have a bathtub. We had a washtub," said Watts. "Annie had a big home with living room, dining room, kitchen, bedrooms, and a bathroom with this huge bathtub. When you are 5 years old, everything is bigger! Annie would fill that thing with water. It was some of the happiest hours of my childhood, going down to Annie's place and playing in the bathtub."

It was this type of story, and the way she would tell it, that brought Watts' friends and family to encourage her to put it down on paper. Storytelling is an art form all its own, but creating a book is a completely different art, and one Watts knew she wasn't prepared to do on her own.

Watts had read an article in The Bulletin about local TV producer and writer Sandy Cummings and her work at the High Desert Museum. Looking for someone to help her write her life story, Watts contacted Cummings. In turn, Cummings connected Watts with local author Ellen Waterston who then referred her to Hawker.

Hawker was intimately connected, through collaboration with Waterston, with The Nature of Words, a nonprofit literary arts program that was founded in 2005. The nonprofit kept Hawker busy for 10 years until it closed its doors in 2014. But the friendship between the two women goes back even further.

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— Louise Hawker

“We have been working together for over 20 years,” said Hawker, reflecting on her relationship with Waterston. “She inspires me because she is such a great storyteller, and through her workshops, helps people create their own stories.”

The idea of helping people write their life stories came to Hawker around the same time The Nature of Words launched. Her first “client” was her then husband, George.

“He was quite a bit older and had very interesting life experiences,” said Hawker. “George had been in the U.S. Army in World War II, was a power grower in Florida, and registered blacks to vote in Florida.”

Hawker started collecting her husband’s life stories for a memoir, but before she could finish the project, George passed away. Ultimately, the experience sparked an interest in helping people with their life stories.

“I realized how unique the life

experiences of older people were and how much they still related to current day life,” said Hawker.

Two years ago, Hawker returned to working as a personal historian. This time, her interest was sparked by a chance encounter.

While working with The Nature of Words, Hawker met Lee McMurrin when he came to the nonprofit asking for someone to help him finish and edit his life story. Waterston referred McMurrin, a local author, to Hawker, and a long, working relationship was born.

McMurrin was dedicated to writing his life story, inspired to share his perspective on an important part of the country’s history.

“People in the Pacific Northwest only have a vague understanding of what happened in the school systems in the east during the ‘60s and ‘70s,” said McMurrin. “I decided to tell my stories to show how we overcame adversities.”



Louise Hawker spends time listening to Nancy Watt’s stories as they pour over keepsakes from her past.



Nancy Watts proudly displays a magazine cover featuring her with her husband and her son. The magazine included an article highlighting the family’s move to a ranch in Arizona, a part of her life that Watts will include in her book.

Hawker and McMurrin met regularly at Bend coffee shops for close to a year to discuss the life-story project. Each time, McMurrin brought his latest writings, which Hawker would then take home to read and edit.

“It was a meeting of the minds,” said McMurrin. “It was not just grammar and punctuation meetings at the coffee shop, Louise acted as my sounding board and made sure that I captured important information and checked my facts.”

McMurrin has written two books with the help of Hawker. The first book, “Stories from the Front Lines of Integration,” tells about his experiences as a superintendent during the court-ordered integration of public schools in Ohio in the mid-60s.

His second book, “Aren’t We Rich!” is McMurrin’s personal memoir about his life from the

Great Depression to the Digital Age. The title of the book stems from his mother’s belief that in spite of their poverty during the Great Depression, the family was rich in values and experiences.

Hawker points out that she is inspired by her client’s life stories.

“The human spirit always finds a way to overcome challenges,” said Hawker. “The things that we deal with today might seem daunting, but some of the events the older generation went through are much more challenging.”

The collaboration between Hawker and her clients takes many forms, and various roads to completion. Her involvement can vary from editing something a client writes, to recording their stories through face-to-face interviews and then crafting the stories into chapters, and eventually into a book.



“It runs the gamut depending on what people are comfortable with and what they want me to do,” said Hawker.

McMurrin had already written a first draft and needed an editor to finish his life-story project. Watts came to Hawker with parts of her life story written in longhand — she too needed Hawker’s help to continue her work.

During the past two years, most of Hawker’s clients have come from the Greatest Generation, those in their late 70s and 80s. Each of them has had a completely different story.

“It is the most rewarding and interesting work I have ever done,” said Hawker.

A life-story project usually begins with a questionnaire that Hawker presents to each of her clients. The questions range from basic family history to what kinds of games they played when they were kids or favorite books and movies.

“It helps my clients jump-start thinking about their life,” said Hawker.

Capturing a person’s story is as much detective work as it is a deep-dive into the client’s life. Hawker has become a history detective in the process and takes pride in doing research to verify dates, names, and places in her clients’ life stories.

“I am a real history geek,” said Hawker. “I can never let anything go and I have to pursue details.”

If there are hidden gems that reveal themselves during the interview process or in the submitted manuscripts, Hawker can decide to spend a little extra time to “tease out” the story.

Hawker is adamant that there is no such thing as a “bland life.”

“Unless you want your life to be bland, it is usually the opposite way. Everybody has a story to tell.”

As the baby boomer generation is slowly aging, Hawker encour-

ages people in their 50s and 60s to start thinking about collecting their life stories.

“It is never too early to start,” said Hawker. “Your memory tends to fade as time goes on. If you can record events as they happen, you have a better chance of having more details to add to your story.”

According to Hawker, writing a life story does not end with good storytelling. It also includes an organized photo collection.

“Photos are important because sometimes they tell as much of the story as the writing does,” she said.

With the digital recorder still on, Hawker and Watts look at old photographs spread out across the table as Watts describes in vivid detail what is captured in the pictures. Her collection also includes newspaper clippings and magazine articles that tell the story of a long, interesting life. A life well lived, worthy of a book or two.

THE MAKING OF A BOOK

Once the life story is done and ready to be published, Hawker’s clients have a wide array of options. McMurrin was Hawker’s first client to publish his books, and three other clients have also opted to produce books.

“They want a professional product. It gives their life-story project more gravitas. They want something that they’re proud to hand out to people,” said Hawker.

Whether the final product is a book which can be made available on Amazon, or a PDF that can be emailed to friends and family, Hawker outsources the design work. She works with a book designer who turns each manuscript into a print-ready file, either to be published as an e-book or printed.

Turning a life-story into a book is an investment in both time and money. It is hardly a weekend project, explained Hawker. McMurrin’s first book project, for example, took a year to complete.

Hawker charges her clients by the hour for her services.

“People are comfortable with that setup,” said Hawker. “They know how much they are spending and if the budget isn’t working, we can dial it back.”

Recent developments in on-demand printing makes it fairly cost-effective to print even small quantities. Depending on the quantity of books ordered, the price can come in between \$3 or \$4 per book.

“Stories from the Front Lines of Integration: Toledo, Ohio 1965-1975 and Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1975-1987.” Copyright 2014, Lee R. McMurrin. Excerpt from Chapter Three, “Attitudes on Race: Milwaukee, Wisconsin Public Schools 1975-1987,” pages 33-34.

“At my first official board meeting in July, 25 young men dressed in Nazi uniforms filled the front row seats in the administration building’s auditorium at a regular, monthly school board meeting. Their uniforms were complete, from black boots to swastikas on their armbands and Nazi flags flying. Behind them were girls in uniform, known as Brownies. To my surprise, behind them were their parents and supporters. I felt sorry for these young men; they didn’t know what it meant to be a Nazi. The public wasn’t allowed to speak at these official board meetings. There were public hearings on all items before the board, at which individuals could speak. But this was not allowed at regular board meetings. The Nazis were there to make a statement. This new superintendent would have to deal with them if he attempted to educate black children.

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Then the Nazis came forward. They had life-size figures of a Jewish stereotype and a representation of a black person in the appearance of a gorilla. Their presentation was that these two groups had not evolved enough to be educated, and it was a waste of money to try. Their presentation was terrible in every respect. But when they had finished, the other groups that had advised against the policy said they supported it, and the board should pass it so everyone knows what side they are on. At the next regular meeting of the school board, they passed the policy unanimously.”

