The most public of all history: family history and heritage albums in the transmission of records

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I kind of end up in between scrapbookers and family historians because I’m the oldest of sixteen grandchildren, sixteen cousins. My mom is the oldest and I’m the oldest, so it’s kind of been passed down to me. Everybody in my family has just thrown their pictures at me, and the stories behind the pictures too. And it was supposed to be that way, I guess.

Francesca (b. 1962)

So the first thing that I did was I sent out a letter to the whole family, just explaining what I’m doing.... And then I asked each person to complete the questionnaire. Sign it, with their own handwriting, of course. And that was the beginning.... I asked for favorites, for example, color, food, music, hobbies and pastimes. Because I just didn’t want it to be a just fact—born, married this date, died this date, I wanted to get personality ... movies, and wishes, and the greatest love.... I wasn’t sure how I was going to theme the book. So that’s why I asked about colors and certain things. And then say.... If someone chose purple, for their page, and I’ll use purple as their background page. To kind of incorporate, I just wasn’t sure about how I was going to lay it out. So I wanted to get as much information as possible, to kind of trigger it and look for, maybe, the commonalities between all of the answers. And say okay, this is how the book will go: I kind of wanted it to happen organically, in a sense. And that’s why I asked about questions all over the place ... greatest love and if you were a title, book title, or movie title. Just to get an idea of the energy of my family members.

Yamilee (b. 1975)

This chapter describes heritage album makers, like these above, who tell of the beginnings and processes of their work. The chapter is divided between descriptions of settings, reasons given for choosing to represent families in albums, processes of finding and keeping records, and the influences of gender and migration. Finally, an
interpretation of these descriptions as part of the transmission and pluralization of records concludes the chapter.

Settings: People in Houses of Memory

Demographic information on album makers is presented in Chapter Four but briefly noted here is their division between twenty-five women and one man. They are solidly middle class.

As noted in Chapter One, they search for and create genealogical information, but they do so within scrapbooking groups. In the 1990s and early 2000s, heritage albums were considered one of the first memory products every serious scrapbook maker should make.\(^1\) Of the fifty types of albums that Cheryl Lightle and Rhonda Anderson listed in their 2002 account of the history of Creative Memories, heritage albums were first ranked. “Your heritage album can include anything that links you to the past: sepia photographs, pages from an old diary, genealogy charts, the deed for family property, and stories…. One is encouraged to add “details about the lifestyle of your ancestors…. also stories that lay bare your relatives’ hearts: how did they think, what did they feel, what touched them deeply.”\(^2\)

Why make such an album? One will, according to Anderson and Lightle, get to “know your family better,” be “assured that your family history will not be forgotten.” Other scrapbook advisors and vendors promote similar purposes. Heritage albums “open doors to insight, truth, and a richer life today … and tomorrow.”\(^3\) Yet, as the introductory excerpt by Francesca suggests, heritage album makers place themselves somewhere

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\(^2\) Lightle and Anderson, *The Creative Memories*, 68.

\(^3\) Ibid., 68–69.
between two communities of family history. One looks to them then to explain something of both worlds.

Album makers’ homes are one place to begin this comparative exploration. In the homes of album makers, memory has not yet spilled over into as many rooms as it has in the homes of family historians. Visiting fifteen album makers, one sees that their homes are larger, grander in interior design, and also better tended, at least for a guest, than the ten homes seen in visits to family historians. Generally, album makers appear as organizers; family historians, as absent-minded professors. Album makers have framed images in every room, bookcases of albums, specially-made sorters where photos can await labeling, and various bags and boxes generally tucked away. Family historians have surfaces throughout the house covered in files and books.

Some of these differences may be because the majority of album makers are younger than family historians. Album makers do not have yet a lifetime of accumulations. Only two of the album makers had been at work on albums for more than twenty years, as opposed to sixteen of the family historians who had worked more than twenty years. Also, among the fourteen album makers who were ages 31–45, twelve had young children. Thus they have houses that have to accommodate these children, as well as the serious leisure habits of the adults in the family.

Critically, too, here, album makers’ houses of memory are linked to one form of memory, the heritage album. The purpose of the album is to contain memory, in all senses of the word contain. Albums hold and tidy memory. Though there is much discussion in the blogosphere on how scrapbooking supplies come to be “stuffed in every
corner” and every other household chore is overlooked, the houses of heritage album makers were almost uniformly immaculate. There was a sense that a deliberate management of clutter was made, either for me, the researcher, or for themselves and for their families. Tending memory is a private but orderly concern for them, not unlike that practiced by generations of women who from Greeks who worshiped the quiet Hestia, to noblewomen of the middle ages in their memorialization of the dead, to Catherine Beecher and her nineteenth-century followers, to readers of Martha Stewart’s magazine and countless other women’s journals today.

The scrapbooking movement places heavy emphasis on this traditional, caretaking posture. Making memory books should bring beauty, not inconvenience others. All scrapbook vendors and websites provide album makers with advice on “shaping spaces,” which are never called their “archives” and never called “studios.” Instead, album makers call these spaces the “scrapbook room,” the “scrapbook corner,” “my room,” “my craft room” or “my sewing room,” or in one case, “my study.”

First Remembered Memory Forms: Families, Stories, and Places

Heritage album makers observe these names but they are considered more studious, “bookish,” and even, “preoccupied” than other types of scrapbookers. For these album makers, an interest in the past overrides their interest in scrapbooks about present day life. Heritage album makers place this interest in various aspects of their own pasts: their

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position in the family, family relationships in general, and especially, a family emphasis on place. When asked what made them begin to collect materials, seventeen of the album makers referred to places known in childhood, and to the way these places were made known to them. They were quick to show or to recall maps, postcards, and other visual images of cities where their families had lived. Introduced in Chapter One, Anna (b. 1922) is one who remembers this connection between family and place, and her later interest in making albums:

My interest came from the fact that when my grandfather used to—We all lived together on [street name, at specific street address], I’ll never forget. And he’d sit on the porch mainly on a Sunday and he’d have some of his grandchildren there at the house and he would sit there and tell us the story of his family and when he was growing up—and he grew up here in New Orleans. And, uh, it was interesting and it just grew from that; I really do believe that’s what it grew from.

He encouraged her to know places.

I would go down and just look at the old places in the Quarter and I knew from my grandparents’ stories that they told me, I knew that that’s where they grew up. Especially my grandfather. And so I was able to uh, I started, you know, just scouting around and asking questions, and asking questions.

Her grandfather gave more clues about places and how these influenced who one was, especially how one was a New Orleanian. His life began in a little small town up the river and [he] came to New Orleans as a young boy. And he would always tell us: remember, you’re French and you’re the full French. And you’re not, he would say, and as I heard him, when I was small, I heard him say boogalee. And he meant you didn’t come from, from out [rural Acadian Louisiana and thus earlier Canada], you came from the Alsace, the French from Alsace-Lorraine. We weren’t boogalee. We were the true French.
For other album makers, also, to know a place was to become a part of a particular neighborhood, a city, state, or even this new country. The one male album maker, Simon (b. 1927), remembered:

Mama collected things about New Orleans that maybe don’t relate to our family but do just because our family has been in New Orleans for so many generations. She wasn’t from here so she wanted that history. She married in, as they say. She made herself a part of the city by collecting its history. And that kind of intertwines with the family history because those things are connected to me and why I make the scrapbooks.

Simon had made more than 140 scrapbooks, with seven from the 1990s concerning the homes of families, their geographic placement, their interiors, the families who lived in each one.

Linda (b. 1937) similarly recalled homes as living connections to the past. Her great-aunt and uncle were farmers who lived in a house without running water. Visiting them, she saw how “They still lived like their parents had, in a way that we never got to see, and so then we asked about them, the ones who had come before, the way they were, and what their children were like, who they were, and what they did.”

Other Remembered Beginnings

Central to other album makers’ beginning work is home photography, mentioned in twelve of the interviews. Photographs connected the family within itself and with the world. As Isabelle (b. 1954) recalled,

I remember pictures that my mother would show us, of the signing of the World War II [peace treaty between the US and Japan], the Americans and the Japanese on a boat. There’s a name for it. But my mother had a friend who was on that boat. And so I remember those pictures. But I also remember pictures that … my grandmother, her room had a lot of old pictures. And she had a cedar chest and more old pictures there…. To me it was our personal history. Whether it was national or local or what, or old Life magazines, if we had the pictures, it was our history.
Were birth certificates, school records, and other paper materials recalled with this same ability to enhance some picture of the self in relation to the past, to achieve some sort of metaphoric insertion of the self into history? Mostly not. Only four album makers spoke of these types of records with more than slight acknowledgement. One person was Linda who grew up on military bases. In the army, documentation was almost daily. They document everything they can about your father since he is representing the United States. And they document you too, because you also represent the country when you are on the base. And if anything happens, the papers prove who you are.

She also recalled letters concerned with reporting to duty and discharge records bandied about in conversations between children on the base. She remembered letters that held foreign money, newspaper clippings, or advertisements in foreign languages. Papers from other places were a sort of currency “for us kids.” They were part of “show and tell.”

**Why Begin Heritage Albums? Why Collect Records?**

Different environments then influenced present concerns to know the past. Yet, the past demands more of scrapbook makers than the present, so heritage albums are made sparingly in the ongoing activities of these women and one man. Records are not uniformly accessible to them, either from relatives or repositories. That is, the environments in which they live do not encourage library and archives use. Only four had ever visited an archives or library to find records, though these four plus six others had used archival and library sources online. The presence of online resources is clearly of significance to these new users of records.
But making a heritage album is also considered more difficult since one must understand and “think about it all” more than one would snapshots of day-to-day life. Darlene (b. 1967) and Claudette (b. 1960) spoke of these albums, nevertheless, as important to all scrapbookers. Why? Because heritage albums let you “know on a deeper level” and “leave something” to children “that can never be replaced.” Darlene and Claudette are suburban neighbors who share a “scrapbooking room” in Claudette’s house. Darlene has her own key so she can come and go as she pleases. Mostly, however, they work together, sitting opposite one another at a large table, flanked on one side by a shelf of materials and, on the other by a window that looks onto a large lawn. The room is just adjacent to the front door, opposite the dining room but far enough from the family room and the kitchen to give, like scrapbooks themselves, both privacy and access. Some of their completed scrapbooks line their living-room shelves; others are given as gifts—especially the heritage ones. Some are duplicated, and each of these has varied accompanying decisions about provenance: Where should the originals reside, with the maker, or with the person most honored by the creation? They laugh when they say the word “provenance” to signify their adjustment or discomfort with this concept learned at “a weekend crop workshop.”

Between businesses, children, and husbands, Claudette and Darlene forge their identities as friends and record keepers. But what was the initial pull of making albums? Claudette began because she saw the work of Darlene. She said, “Darlene had these books and the books, the scrapbooks, made it possible for her to be friends with her own teenager. Imagine that…. I knew that my children would one day give me trouble. And I saw this as a way to ward off that trouble. So I began.”
Documents and friendship mediate the world for them, especially their work as mothers. The materials they collect, Darlene says, the stickers, tapes, papers, colored pins, well, “they are there,” but what is foremost is that the boundaries of their lives are set around information about their families and around the processes of collecting and saving this information. She calls this, “the benefits of it all, the total package,” but when asked what that means the answer she tells has something of the oral culture needed to tell of the past, the culture introduced when Joseph in the first chapter tells of a black and white photo but talks of the redheaded sister. Darlene points first to the room, itself, next to Claudette’s house, next in another direction, calling it, “all those other things to learn,” then in another direction, “to learn it from friends or with friends, to learn to shape my family life from them is one of the great blessings. I don’t think many people get that in modern life.” She is a “little suspicious” of what society does offer: “so many experts on everything. It’s confusing.” So, Darlene and Claudette have come to view one another and other scrapbookers as experts, and to view collecting, thinking about, and displaying records as part of their way of handling anxiety.

This accommodation to their own expertise, and this orality necessary to explain their worlds are quickly established, and thus all the more appealing. As Celia (b. 1962) noted:

I always tell my girls [by this she means the women who buy scrapbooks and supplies from her] when they come to a crop for the first time, I said, “Don’t be nervous about coming into a group of people you don’t know.” Because I say, “By the time you leave you’re going to have lifelong friends.” It’s true. It really is true because with that common bond, of making the albums, they do.

Nineteen other interviewees recalled beginning album making because of the friendships this hobby brought. Ten mentioned seeing role models in other scrapbookers
as the most important reason they began. One model they might see is found in someone like Marcella (b. 1947) who began making albums fifteen years ago because she wanted to “shape my life.” Her place of work is in a converted garage, created to hold a table bigger than the two desks of Claudette and Darlene, “larger than a ping pong table,” she says, “the size exactly of four doors lined up side by side.” Underneath are filing cabinets. Three walls of shelving make up more space for papers, files, and tools, and of course, “photographs, and other bits of memories.” Marcella works full-time as a professional but she is also a scrapbook vendor, a consultant. She devotes about three months a year to scrapbook making, selling, and teaching. She also rents a vacation home where consultants, customers, and friends overlap in categories. The bonds of the group are set “around the materials and what they can do for you.” These people help with the rent of this holiday/work space at the beach. She can deduct the expense of the workshops and rent from her taxes. Most of all though, Marcella says, they:

learn from one another. It is not a competitive thing. Rarely is. It is a way of putting some distance on both sadness and happiness in lives. You are putting them on a page and around you are these other women just working with stuff like you are working with. It is all there, in a way, say a divorce or hah, a flooded house. Someone has given you duplicates of the photos you lost in either one of these, but let’s say Katrina. Beside you is someone whose father has died. They are making a record of these things. People are talking about, say recipes, or tanning products. But there is a sense that you work there, you sort all the bad stuff too. Quietly. It makes it manageable, you know. That is what it did for me. Does for me.

Their work then is not only about collecting and displaying materials but also about interpreting these materials. This interpretation goes on within a community, and allows connections to various different communities, past and present, family history and scrapbooking.
Reasons for Continuing on with Heritage Albums

Like Marcella, others also see making albums as a way to achieve this interpretation, to make the past manageable, to “sort” the past. Overall the creation of heritage albums is important to interviewees for three primary reasons. First, these women and one man saw making albums about ancestors as a creative outlet. Second, they believed that their albums will preserve some physical manifestations of the past for later generations. Third, they thought of albums as a way to know and understand (genetically, geographically, and philosophically) the past and the present. All these reasons address connections between various temporal and spatial dimensions, which the scrapbook vendor Creative Memories prefaces in all its publicity as a belief in “the importance of preserving the past, enriching the present, and inspiring hope for the future.”

To Have Some Creative Outlet

A number of interviewees recognized that they wanted more chances for creativity and that album making offered this chance. Heritage albums required imagination in both finding materials and in “thinking about it and how it should reflect what you want.” For Isabelle, they are “books of me. That’s because … I do them really to enjoy their making, their creation, for today, for me.” She has taken the family tree made by a cousin, added stories of an ancestor who was given permission to leave Russia by the czar, and used photocopies of marriage and death records to tell her family story. As she was gathering materials, she thought about “how their lives were shaped, the type of clothes, and the day-to-day food, and I got to tackle how to make this look on a page.” Similarly, the

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owner of a scrapbook store spoke also of the rewards of imagining lives lived long ago:
“It is about placement of things on paper and using the mind and it requires some thought.”

Nineteen of the interviewees spoke of the paper choices, collages, stickers, pens, pencils, stamps, paper cutters, and other art tools. Work with these materials was “addictive.” Especially for two, both born in the late 1970s, the available materials afforded the chance to work deeply with various versions of the past, set within one page, to again, “contain,” that is, to both place and order what they considered “mixed messages” or “those things you don’t quite know how it all fits.”

Seven of the interviewees spoke of themselves as “artsy,” but ten spoke of themselves as “craftsy” and nine, as “not too craftsy.” Twenty had done some other sort of craft-work (quilting, knitting, decoupage, furniture repair) but these hobbies “take up more room.” Only two spoke of album making as related to graphic design. Yet, all but the one man emphasized visual aspects of albums, even those who prefaced remarks by warning that their pages were “simple,” and by noting how they had to try not to worry over “how other albums looked.”

To Make a Lasting Book

Other crafts, the album makers feel, will not last. Scrapbooks, on the other hand, will. “In the future, they [who receive the book] will have memories, where other crafts—you hang it on the wall, it outdates, you throw it away; where this album is something they’ll have forever, to appreciate and look back on.”
Scrapbook consultants, and the many books and websites on scrapbooking, speak extensively of standards of paper and hazards of light and temperature. Preservation is the most emphasized function within the network of these people, materials, and technology. Heritage albums “should be,” as interviewee Jane (b. 1955) even “more than other scrapbooks, a safe book.” By this she means, “archivally safe.” She next discusses Creative Memories’ online dictionary that lists standards and provides a conservation calculator that can be downloaded.

To many interviewees, preservation is handled by buying the products. Preservation becomes something emotional, something symbolic. As Beth (b. 1979) noted, she valued her heritage album since it was

a form where—not only I could look at it, [but also] they could look at it, their grandchildren and their grandchildren can look at it. And just have an idea of--Not only what they did, but how they did it and why they did it and when. And the story as well—that’s preserved for them in the future.

Over half the interviewees talked of what had not been preserved for them, that is, the lack of information available, and they spoke of this lack as a motivator. Cheryl (b. 1961) talked of being given a family scrapbook by someone at a family reunion, a scrapbook that had no names written under the photographs, and no information about the compiler. She recounted:

This was a beautiful book, crumpling but beautiful and over seventy-years old itself. But nothing was written down; I couldn’t tell even that it was about … our family. Now [the maker’s] daughter, who was then 92, the only thing she could identify was herself and her mother, sometimes. So I said, “My children will never be like that.”

To Know the Past

For some, such albums allow learning not only for future generations but also for oneself. Marcella stated that she knew nothing of her family beyond her great-grandparents and their migration to the U.S. from Italy. “In gathering things for a heritage album, you … are also filling in all these gaps in your own life.”

How would this help? “In general, it broadens you. Later I found out that some of these Italians had even fought in the Civil War. I understood the Civil War differently.” As Isabelle noted, “I think I always wanted to know how things, tangible things, shaped people’s lives or stood for things in people’s lives and now I do know more about that.”

Patricia (b. 1965) described knowledge of the past as informing her friend about herself, of providing self knowledge:

In her family, her immediate family, she didn’t really look like anybody else. She didn’t really act like anybody else. And she always would, you know, “Am I adopted?” And they would say “No, you’re not.” She never knew where she really fit in, until her grandmother died and when they looked through her house, they found some photos. And they had a photo of her great-grandmother who looked exactly like her. So she began to make a heritage album, around this great-grandmother. And she wrote stories of what she found; she had letters they found that she read and everything. She’s like, “This is me!” You know, and she finally—like—she was part of the family.

Two album makers recalled workshops where they learned “how ancestors could inspire,” or “could teach, learning about them can teach about life today.” What is unknown from documents, for Cheryl, taught something too. She has a clipping showing a photograph of her great-grandfather. He had lived to be 106 and the newspapers printed an article on him. She links his place of honor with this record but she also imagines his wife:
That’s our prized ancestor because I have a visual piece on him. But in some ways, I’m more interested in his wife because she had 13 children and they all lived. All the children! The more we, my dad and I, have studied the mortality rate in that area, specifically that county, that someone kept records of … and [from those records, I see] it’s phenomenal that these thirteen children would all live. She must have been a very conscientious mother and they must have had enough food and education and oh, all sorts of things that I will never be able to document. But she did something right that I am here now.

For Cheryl, an African American, family history was “always important,” and this importance, if not the actual memories of cousins, was known. Why?

Because, after slavery, all but two of the thirteen children moved away from the South. But you know they had family reunions. They had them every year. I have a record of that in these scrapbooks they had. So I will just do a little better than they did in leaving a record in these albums, but they set the tone.

Heritage album making then is a process that involves “expanding your horizon a little,” “putting names to faces,” and “being part of something bigger than one little self in the world.” As Darlene mentioned:

I helped my husband to understand … his mother’s side [of the family]. I found out that there were even more things that we’ll probably never find out just because of her early childhood. Her father was gone and her mother ended up leaving too and she was raised by his grandmother…. From digging you definitely find out more.

She had been able to “dig” through online sources (the Library of Congress, National Archives, Social Security Death Index, and “Cyndi’s List”). Asked how she had learned these sources, she replied, “It is something I overheard at a crop session.”

Eugenie (b. 1970) also used such sources in making a heritage album for her mother, but she thought of the album, rather than the sources, as facilitating self-knowledge. “It was being able to present it all together,” that was important. About her mother, she stated,
I had the few pictures that she had of her parents that she gave me and then I went and found city directory information on them and went and found some orphanage records, and a court case. All these when I put them together gave her a glimpse into what their life was like, prior to ever raising her. Her childhood had been horrible. He drank, the father, her father, my grandfather, and deserted the family eventually. And the book, now, she said, it gives her an understanding of why they were the way they were. I think that so many times we’re quick to blame the way we are on our past or whatever. But this is not like that, this is thinking about them as people. And my mother’s father was so poor at one time, I mean, he was eating out of garbage cans, as far as I could tell, he lost everything. Well, that helped her understand why he was abusive … because he was bitter and it didn’t excuse his behavior, but it helped her have a glimpse into why, you know, what made him.

The creativity and the preservation of a family’s history were also valued on a practical level by Sally (b. 1955):

because I’ve actually helped people in the family with the genetic stuff. And just last year, my dad got sick. They couldn’t find out why…. I took in the scrapbook to his doctor. I said four people in his family died of appendicitis. I said, check his appendix…. And they checked and it was. I could have been wrong but I was glad I had the album.

Knowledge of the past and the self within the past remain one of the most important motivations of album makers. As Charlotte (b. 1943) said, “It’s just awesome I think to know and help you remember what came before you and so you can know where you’ve been has some reason behind it.” Francesca similarly remarked: “It kind of moves you forward to the next thing … kind of gives you that immortality, so to speak, with your family.”

To Connect To Others

The interviewees believe that albums allow a connection with the past by gathering materials and learning what the materials represent. At the same time, making albums allows connections to other scrapbookers and the immediate family in the present. Finally
there is the focus on the legacies for future generations. Twenty-two mentioned “connections,” or “connecting.”

The storms and flooding of the 2005 hurricane season meant even more reasons to consider parallels with the past. Loss and potential loss were understood as times to look for records in libraries and archives. In her Katrina evacuation to Texas, one album maker was reminded that her mother had been a teenager in hurricane Betsy. The family lost “family photos, school records, marriage certificates, all the old things” in that 1965 storm:

They didn’t have photos of where they lived ever again. It was too frightening that everything could be lost…. My mother talks about it constantly. So I got some images from the library and from relatives and made her an album to stand in for the places lost. This was during our own evacuation and I wanted the kids to get it that life went on.

Processes

Although using the images from the library required “research,” most album makers call their work “creating.” All but four prefer using materials gathered in the family. Considered in stages that usually overlap one another, album makers concentrate on finding the type of binder and “look” of an album they wish to use, laying out the images and records to represent the past and the present on different pages, working with various layouts until they are satisfied. The use of digital photographs, especially of artifacts, and scanned records are considered as they go along.

Finding the Perfect Album

Isabelle offered one example of the primacy of form, its ability to act as a solution. During a time of stress in her life, she felt inundated by paper. On her way home one day, she thought about “albums that I had also inherited and one I was given, for my wedding
… it was a strap hinge … it laid flat. Every page laid flat, from the first page to the last.”
She found the company that sold this type of album. “That thought,” Isabelle recalled, “it changed life. I just was like, ‘Oh my God, this is what I’ve been looking for.’ I could reshape this paper problem of mine. I could do something different.” Another scrapbook consultant, Jane, had a similar epiphany. Finding an album that suited her, and that had “archival qualities … it was like a light bulb went on in my head.”

Both of these interviewees are referring to the Holes Webway album discussed in Chapter Three, but another type of album was also mentioned in the interviews. As Mignon (b. 1964) noted:

I will never use an album where once you’ve put it in the order it’s got to stay in that order and you’ve got to redo everything. I love the beauty of those albums cause, that blue one there, as it got bigger, I broke it into two volumes. So as we get more stories, I add them to them. I try to be more diligent of saying who the relationship was of who we got the interview from. I still have probably three or four full cassettes of interviews that I need to transcribe. I’ve got a whole tablet full of notes, so yeah, they’re never done. Cause then as a person dies, then we end up getting their stuff and finding, adding more to the stories that we already have. So they’re always a work in progress.

Designing the Heritage Album

Once the album is in hand, heritage album makers are instructed to begin asking questions of family members about where ancestors lived, what they did on a daily basis, what was important to them. Next to be sought from relatives are information on birthdays, school records, marriage certificates, and causes of death. In other words, the oral tradition of family stories comes first or is most prized among album makers.
Records themselves follow. Publications on scrapbooking suggest ways to display these stages of research,9 but most often friends at gatherings help one another.

For these albums, album makers are advised to choose dark colored paper to emulate nineteenth-century albums. They are told to write in gold or white ink. They are told to include minimal decoration, to concentrate on information. “Decorative touches should be minimal in a legacy album as they distract from the main items and may fall apart over time.”10 All the heritage albums shown to me followed this advice.

Using Technology

All but one of the heritage album makers discussed how their work would not be possible without digital photography, scanning, and photocopying. Technology extends the performative aspect of remembering,11 making possible and desirable these processes involved in making a heritage album. While an example of an ancestor’s handwriting trumps his or her photograph in what interviewees most valued in their albums, they are very conscious of their learning about and use of advanced technology. In a typical month, there are usually at least two opportunities to take workshops (online and/or in consultant’s homes) on digital photography and scanning. Digital photography is the premier technology among these efforts, closely followed by photocopying and scanning. Album makers are also heavy users of scrapbooking websites. Five mentioned online

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scrapbooks, and fourteen mentioned digitally created scrapbooks. They also have knowledge of various memory banks where photos can be stored commercially, and sixteen of the interviewees mentioned external hard drives. Marcella recognized the growth too of the digital age, and its advantages for album makers:

Electronically created scrapbooks, these save time and money…. We all know that people are not printing out all their photos, but what Creative Memories has done is to begin teaching not only how to save photos to external hard drives but also to work with one’s really good pictures.

On the other hand, seventeen of the interviewees mentioned problems managing the quantity of digital photographs, even given special Creative Memories software to do so. Nine were also aware of the fragility of digital photographs and thus the need to make albums of “the best pictures,” as one said.

Overall, though, technology is the great enabler of all they do and they are proud of their use and creation of memory products. That they become experts on technology is another empowerment of album making, one that they see “as helping us as women.” Why so? Women do not usually have “skills around computers and now we do.”

**Influences: Gender and Migration**

How is the influence of gender roles felt in other ways? As noted in Chapter Three, the scrapbook vendors, especially Creative Memories, have walked a fine line between religion, politics, and traditional gender roles now for twenty-one years by emphasizing self-esteem. This message was articulated in fifteen of the interviews. But their words were more vague than the national literature on scrapbooking. In the Alabama and Louisiana groups, the evangelical nature gets poured into beliefs about women’s
particular adeptness at “holding families together through memory.” Understanding migration through album making also is considered in terms of family cohesiveness.

**Gender**

As mentioned earlier, although one man was interviewed, 98 percent of album makers nationwide are women.¹² One hundred percent of those people attending cropping sessions or retreats in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast were women. All of the twenty-six interviewees believed that women more than men were likely to keep family history, in general.

Gender-segregation is acknowledged, defended, and “celebrated.” As one said, “Like men play with balls, grown men, we play too but with something that will last.” In some ways, this takes on the image they have of themselves as average but industrious people. In other ways, their ways of speaking show a certain childish quality. For the most part, they have not taken up the habit of calling themselves women. One forty-year old spoke of a “scraping cottage” that she intends to have soon:

We have a little house two doors down that my father and mother gave us and eventually we’re hoping to make that our scrapbooking place. We’ll call it a little scraping cottage, and a bunch of girls will sit down there and play, and scrapbook a few times a month, and make a little club.

In crop sessions, women value that they can incorporate an acceptable way to be away from family while simultaneously taking family as the subjects of their albums. Crop sessions can include as few as four and as many as 300 women. Some of the larger events include long weekends together in hotels where scrapbooking activities are

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supplemented by “massages, pedicures, book groups, cooking lessons.” Album makers see these efforts as broadening their roles in life, not restricting them. As one said, “At the crops and retreats, oh my Lord, everybody comes from different walks of life, you know, it’s not--We’re not the same in any way, economically, socially, culturally. So it’s interesting…. I meet people; I hear stories I would have never heard.”

Mothers with young children especially value album making since it can be home-based. As in the tidiness of their homes, album makers in general consider homemaking as part of a moral imperative concerned with mothering, family cohesiveness, and sharing.13

Technology makes this haven one that can accommodate images of the past, in old or new forms. The message is that finding ancestors is one way to tie the family together through objects and through technology.14 Album makers reinterpret both the place of women and the place of making memory texts in response to market forces, especially the availability of goods (foremost, albums themselves, but also electronic access to the past), and social forces, such as migration, thoughts on women as the primary caregivers of children, and an ethnically diverse community.15

Financial rewards make scrapbooking a more viable alternative than other direct sales experiences dominated by women. As Eugenie stated:

With the jewelry, I had some problems with people having a return or whatever, so I was having to send it back. And I was feeling like I was not representing a company that I was comfortable doing. Tupperware has been around forever, it’s a wonderful product. However, once people buy that bowl from you, they don’t have a re-occurring need--for me, as the consultant. The difference with this [Creative Memories] is I’m teaching them something, number one, that is valuable, life-wise. But at the same time, as they work they’re going to consume their products and need more, and want to learn new ideas. So that’s been-- the residual sales is what keeps you going as far as sales-wise.

According to Marcella, “It is the quilting bee gone to science fiction.”

Simon, on the other hand, does not want to participate in a group. He has not been given the opportunity to even buy their products. “I don’t know if I want to learn digital scrapbooking and I certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable telling about my albums to strange women.” Isabelle has one male customer; Marcella two, but the others had no male customers. Men work in the four scrapbook stores in Alabama and Louisiana, but no men ever came into the shops during seven visits there during 2006 to 2009.

In some ways men are privileged within the albums themselves. The Q and A section of Lasting Memories in 2007 featured this question:

In genealogy etiquette, should the paternal ancestor be displayed first in a scrapbook album? The answer: There’s no hard and fast rule, according to Marcia Yannizze Melnyk, author of The Weekend Genealogist and Family History 101. When using separate pages, she usually puts the paternal first. On a two page spread, she puts the man on the left page with his family photos and the women on the right hand page with hers.

Why? “This seems to work the best.”

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But how did this play out in the albums in Louisiana and Alabama? Ten of the fifty-two heritage albums shown to me featured women ancestors as the “main character.” Thirty-two featured both men and women ancestors, but began with the male. The others were created around specific subjects: the military (which for the most part meant male ancestors), a christening gown (male and female babies, but a tradition mediated by women), dolls (also mediated by girls and women), houses (of interest to both males and females), and holidays (usually more female-dominated preparations for celebrations, but football games too were included here).

Migration

Migration is similarly muted but ever present in the conversations and advice of album makers. The prescriptive literature tells that “Your heritage can be as simple as the past 15 years or as complex as the past 150 years. Your heritage is really about your background and traditions.” However, this advice also assumes that families have migrated. Among the first questions album makers are encouraged to ask of their elders, are “Where did you grow up? Who [in your family] lived near you?” An alternate form of memoir, one that does not require attention to straight narrative, the heritage album “lets these people, this family that was separated, come back together,” according to Marcella.

In this reunion, there is again the metanarrative of migration and sacrifice. As Francesca noted:

Making the heritage album makes us look back, and say, this is what the family did; this is what we’ve accomplished. Because, as I really believe, there is so little time for really leaving a record, people don’t think they’re important enough

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17 Album Tutor.
either to think what they did counted. I don’t think, often at the end of the day; the kids, work, house, did I do anything? But if you have this album, you remember, others did the same before you. They worked, so you are a little farther along in this world. It’s nice to see what people have done to get you to the point that you are now.

Migration is also a more immediate concern. As another said,

I want the kids to know who Aunt Blanche is. But they’re never going to know who Aunt Blanche is. I mean, we’re lucky if we get to see her once every ten years. And that wasn’t the case, I think, fifty years ago. You grew up with extended family everywhere. So I think it [making albums] brings that tie together. I think it’s really important.

Fellow scrapbookers can come also to reconstitute roles once confined to the family. As Darlene noted about the hobby itself, “You get so many women … who are working now, and families spread out all over the country. So it recreates … [a] place where there are people like you and people not like you, but you know them all.”

On the other hand, the history of the U.S. itself, especially migration, presents problems to some album makers. As Isabelle noted:

In my eight years as a creative memories consultant, I have found, you would be surprised, how few people are doing albums on heritage and one of the reasons is it’s so overwhelming. People moved so much! And then to find where they moved and what they did, well that is a lot to do.

For Francesca, the family had immigrated to the U.S. during her mother’s childhood. They were quickly assimilated, and part of this assimilation was fitting in and forgetting.

They want to know why I think it is so important to remember. Their children, my generation and my children, we are taught some of the dances and some of the cooking, but we are not told the stories. And when I ask, I can only go so far before one of them says, “Why are you asking?”
For others with much longer histories in the U.S., making such an album is also
sometimes perceived as upsetting American beliefs in the melting pot, a place free of
prejudice. Sally remembers family members’ embarrassment with their Irish heritage.

There was this feeling that if anything was bad, it was because they were Irish. No
matter there was German and French mixed in there, every bad thing that
happened, and what doesn’t happen in all families that has some bad? No matter;
it was because they were Irish.

Interpreting the Work of Album Makers

The creation of heritage albums shows the circulation of private records,
especially as they move seemingly slowly, prosaically to a more public realm. Shared in
the crop session and online, they pass outside the family. In an era where technological
capabilities make memory traces ever more prevalent, the transmission of records and
their use in collective memory formation becomes all the more prominent.

Transmission
At present, album makers have recast the eighteenth-century form of a “scrapbook
genealogy” such as can be found at the New England Historic Genealogical Society.¹⁹
Making such albums has given more women a more visible role than ever as record
keepers, a role usually relegated to stay in the background, to keep memory, but keep it
tightly among themselves and let others, especially more powerful men, carry it into the
world.

In terms of transmission, there is an emphasis above all in “getting the names
down,” and for the living family, getting these names in handwriting since that will “tell
more to those who come after,” and “showing these albums to the family.” The centrality
of future transmission of the personal, not the emphasis on proof in the examples of the

¹⁹ Salls, “Scrapbook Genealogies,” 56–57
family historians, can be seen as part of the overall heritage movement with its focus on “the present-mindedness” of the past and a “worship of memory” without reflection or basis in history.20

Yet to album makers their own subjectivity is the goal. For them objectivity and subjectivity are not polarizing characteristics. Rather, they aim for an interpreted meaning, an unabashed “here are the memories available to me and so here is how I interpret them.” This response is akin to family historians in their search for meaning noted by Yakel and Torres.21 But more overtly than family historians, album makers maintain and display an emphasis on private records and private versions.

In some ways they take on the view that their albums, like the family photographs studied by Marianne Hirsch, are “composite, heterogeneous media, ‘imagetexts’: visual texts that is, whose readings are narrative and contextual but which also, in some ways resist and circumvent narration.”22 The album makers work with this composite make-up but they also see their role as working against this resistance, the dead-end that any photo without narration would have.

Cyndi’s List, that massive referral page to all things genealogy, lists some sixty websites from its main page on scrapbooking.23 All these pages in one fashion or another concern the transmission of family records from one album maker to someone else. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is one scrapbooking site listed with Cyndi. By following links one can get answers from NARA to the following questions: How do I preserve my family papers? How can I safely mount my documents,

20 Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past, x–xi.
21 Yakel and Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records,’” 108.
22 Hirsch, Family Frames, 271n2.
23 Howells, Cyndi’s List of Genealogical Sites on the Internet, “Scrapbooks.”
memorabilia, and photographs into albums or scrapbooks? Should I remove my photographs from old albums, such as black paper albums or self-stick albums? How should I caption my photographic prints; is there a safe way to write on the back of photographs? How should I frame and display my photographs? How should I store my photographic prints? How can I get some important documents that I own repaired? Should I digitize my photo collection? Is it safe to throw away my original film and prints after I digitize them?

But from Cyndi’s, one can also visit many other sites, equally weighted here as experts: commercial scrapbooking vendors, the Mormon’s Ancestry.com website, digital scrapbook vendors, and personal websites. The focus is on creating something from and for family memory.

This family memory moves into multiple realms. Although American Studies scholars of the Victorian era have looked to the parlor as the home of the then new photograph album,24 the interviewees in 2006, 2007, and 2008 live in an age in which technology allows the creation of a much expanded space of memory. “The beauty of the Story Book [the digitally created scrapbook] is that you can have multiple copies, so you really can do the heritage albums for the whole family, the same book.” None of the interviewees had worked with online scrapbooks, but ten were followers of such books. “Especially the ones about breast cancer,” said one. “You can follow their feelings and their treatment; it is like a television show.”

Such topics address the other difficulties that heritage albums bring. Transmission is considered a task of women, “to make sure the children get these memories,” but

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24 Vosmeier, “Picturing Love and Friendship,” 207–218; Siegel, “‘Miss Domestic’ and ‘Miss Enterprise,’” 251–267.
memories themselves, recontextualized within albums are not without problems that come from knowledge of the larger society, and even of the widening circles of who will see the album. As the interviewees see it, there should be a positive frame. As one stated, “Well, you do want to add the happier memories, not the sad ones. That’s just human nature.” But how does one put an optimistic lens on societal and personal problems? As Anna stated about her heritage as a white woman:

Well going way back, we, there’s a bust down there in the museum down in the French Quarter and offhand I can’t think of his name … my great-great-grandfather’s cousin, his records. And he was a very wealthy man here in the city and come to find out he did have Negro blood in him. And, uh yet, my grandfather was the proudest Frenchman that you could ever meet and fair, fair, fair [in color], but he did find out that he was a distant relative of this man. And another of his relatives was tied in some way to the nuns, the black nuns [sisters of the Holy Family, an order founded by a woman who refused to become part of the system in which octoroons were taken as the mistresses of white men]. And this nun, she’s right now up for sainthood, Henriette Delille, well anyway, we are related to her. And if you know why there are family secrets about this, well, then you have to think how your ancestors felt and acted. And you sometimes don’t know what to think.

Difficulties for album makers were not only those of thoughts and feelings. Commenting on the segregation of the U.S., an African-American album maker, Cheryl noted some of the problems she had in attempting to find records for her albums:

But there’s a story. I am trying to find a family Bible, of the white family. So, you see, this is something that makes it difficult: they’re afraid. …I’m registered on Rootsweb and I worded it specifically so you don’t know what race I am, but that I’m interested in information on such and such. Someone did contact me from California. And I said oh I actually have some information on your people, can we exchange information? So I packaged everything up and sent what I had and I said well in return when you go visit that area, could you look for this for me? And that’s kind of where I guess, when she—I knew that was going to happen, that when she got to Virginia she would find out that I was black, and wouldn’t give me the information. Sure enough that’s what happened.
How did she deal with this problem? She left a blank space to signify what could come one day. She also wrote the story of the Bible, describing her difficulty in locating it. She recontextualized the overall process of finding records, and the overall continuing problems of the legacies of slavery.

In other respects, too album makers’ experiences with the inaccessibility of records demonstrate potential problems with transmission of records. As Grace notes of her search for archival documents:

I would call the Halls of Records. They will send you marriage licenses and things but they are not a copy of the actual one. They are just like a form. I wanted something authentic to put in the book so I would have to call them, “Could you pull this and make a copy?” Most times they will but they charge you a lot of money and they take forever. “We’ll put you on the list.” And three months later you’ll get it in the mail. And it is not the form. It is just the content of the form. I have seen birth certificates and they are not like this.

Archival theory teaches that “non-electronic records are kept as authentic records by maintaining them in the same form and state of transmission in which they were when made or received and set aside.”

Here it is the researcher who has noticed what has changed in the migration to a new medium, a new representation of the past.

A certain look is desired in other ways as well that concerns context, content, and form. For some it is the look of family, an “affiliative look” one might say. The family must look like the family. A record must look like a record.

Despite these problems, the interviewees still repeat many of the sayings of the scrapbooking world in general that memory should be interwoven with daily life, pictured in albums that speak to the present, even if the memories are harsh. This is the

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26 Hirsch, Family Frames, 254.
most prominent aspect of their recontextualization, and is no different than any other sort of memorialization in speaking to the present. So Francesca puts the family tree by the sonogram for each of her children, in the first album made for each child. So Patricia makes a heritage album around a christening gown, adding the family tree and showing on the branches and leaves who had worn the gown. Subsequent pages featured church records and photographs of the baptisms. So Simon adds family history pages to many of his more than 140 albums, especially in children’s albums joining, for example, images of a child’s judo lessons with photos of his father’s fencing lessons in the early twentieth century; his daughter’s college graduation with that of her great-grandmother; and a horseback riding camp of his grandson with his great-grandfather’s barn on a plantation. But so too is Sally’s placement of an obituary of someone who committed suicide. Because she can frame this memory, add her own comment or leave a blank space, recontextualization is at the core her album making, and for others too, the core, often of their daily thoughts on album making.

*Pluralization*

All the album makers used the making of heritage albums as means for memories to extend outward into the future, and often, into other types of environments (farther away, the homes of their descendants, and nearby, the crop sessions of next month.) In their thinking, however, they did not necessarily ponder over their part in a public memory outside family or scrapbooking circles. Only one had considered donating their albums or any records to a library or archives. Both upper-middle-class albums makers—Francesca and Simon—had materials any archives would want, and knew this to be the case. They discussed the papers of their celebrated relatives, and the importance of these papers to
the larger society, but the albums themselves they considered “too private” to go to an archives or a library. Simon’s wife had donated her scrapbooks of camp and school life to an archives, but he, with considerable emotion, said, “They are for my children.” He offered an example of how he is still validated by the scrapbooks his mother kept on the family, still maintained in his den, a more masculine word but a room very like Anna’s memory room.

Yet at crop sessions and workshops, as noted above, it was the diversity of people they valued, the knowledge of other people’s families. So they lived a more pluralized life but they did not necessarily move records or memories into collective memory. Pluralization in the archival sense is not yet a part of their processes of learning the past.

Or is it precisely so because they create both lived and archival memories?27 One of their most common comments concerned how little is actually known of the past, and how their work supplements what can be known. Over and over, they repeated this statement of “how little is known.” For some this is a problem of migration. As Laura (b. 1970) stated: “The thing that bothered me the most is some of these people we’re looking at, they’re deceased, and I wasn’t able to do them justice.”

Or, as Crystal (b. 1962) stated,

It’s really frustrating when you just have so little about this person. This person lived this life and left behind children and grandchildren and I have three facts. That’s very, very frustrating to me. I try to find out as much as I can. You know, talk to everybody, call old neighbors, friends, anything I can find out. I just—that’s my worst fear--is--this person lived a whole life, [and] I have three things to say.

What can she do with this fear? “Make albums for my children.”

Their children, they believe, will carry forth a broadened access to family history. The tools of their mother’s rooms and spaces are opened to the children at a certain age. They learn album making. The children also have many more resources available to them to carry forth records and recontextualized records than their mothers have. As Lynette (b. 1967) stated:

My daughter … She doesn’t want to do the crafty pasting, gluing, but she’ll say, “Mom, what do you want to do? What do you want to write? How do you want to put it?” Or she will say, “I’ll go on the computer, I’ll print out what I can find and bring it to you.” She likes history. So I have a little assistant. Yeah, she’s really big on history, so she’s interested and, she’s even looked up clothes. Trying to date them as clues. Because we have beautiful pictures of her great-grandmother in ball gowns, Mardi Gras ball gowns, and that started a whole, “What ball was this?” and “Where did the dress come from?”

In addition, scrapbooking in general is thought of as a hobby that reaches out to other people. Asked why she no longer quilted, Jane said, “I had to make a choice. So I thought, well, scrapbooking is going to reach more people.” Here again is the connecting function, the roles Bourdieu located in women’s roles in sharing photographs.28

The association extends to the future. As Grace noted, “When I leave the world, there’s going to be a piece of me somewhere. Don’t know why or who will have them or what they’ll think of them, but the piece of me will be there.”

The Middle Point

Grace, like other album makers, comes from a background that emphasized connections between places, stories, families, traditions, and some creativity. Leisure, economics, generations of gender segregation and migrations shape memory work for her and other album makers. The collective memories of their friends and families are shaped by these album makers. Will these trends continue? Even in an economic downturn, it

seems likely that they may, albeit in some abbreviated form. Although in late 2008, Creative Memories’ refinancing and Chapter 11 bankruptcy\(^{29}\) show how vulnerable the direct sales business can be, the last crop sessions of 2008 also showed an even greater reliance on an exchange of goods based upon in-kind services or products, a determination to beat the system this way.

The plurality found in other women, and some sense of records extending into the future (some archival pluralization) enlivens the work of these album makers. The interviewees speak of living, moving, acting not just from the safe place of the album, or, for most of them, from the safe place where women are gathered together and tell of their lives, but also towards understanding “a bigger picture.” They pride themselves on the growing knowledge of families, technology, and of themselves made possible by album making.

Yamilee’s quote at the beginning of this chapter speaks to the capacity for a private memory text to cross into the public realm, and to extend understanding of public and private records. She asks somewhat obliquely, “If you were a book title or a movie title, what would that title be?” In other words, how would you place yourself, in just a few words, according to some public shorthand known to others?

Founding partners of Creative Memories, Cheryl Lightle and Rhonda Anderson, market themselves as adept at such shorthand, but nevertheless want a sort of gravitas to be present within memory products.

Although *scrapbooking* is the term generally applied to the work promoted by album companies … we prefer to use the terms *album making* as much as possible. The reason is that scrapbooking is viewed as a hobby or a craft, while making keepsake albums is about building connections, enriching our lives, and leaving a lasting family legacy.\(^{30}\)

Their movement has been wildly successful but the vernacular term “scrapbooking” remains. The heritage albums have come to represent a special, even a rarified place because they are more difficult, needful of learning context and content. They are, like other hybrids studied by Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Sacacino Zboray, “boundary-blurring forms.”\(^{31}\) As Francesca herself at the beginning of this chapter noted, heritage albums are situated between family history and scrapbooking.

This middle point offers advantages, as Virginia Woolf argued for other women outsiders.\(^{32}\) They can reveal those acts that to others are seamlessly a part of culture. What the album makers illuminate is the fact that archival records, until the Internet, were completely out of the range of most women interested in tending memory (and most men as well).

Outsiders always bring a different view, in this case, album makers enlarge the parameters of a public history—outside academia, but also outside those usual purveyors of information. “The press, the history books, the television talk show hosts” shape “what people think they know,” said Isabelle. From her alternative perspective and those of other album makers are created records that balance against or supplement this other world.

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Yet, with technological interfaces, album makers begin to use resources of libraries and archives, and now have quickly taken up digital scanning and photography. The task for archivists is to know these people and their use and creation of records. Album makers offer a remarkable gateway to understanding private archives and various interfaces with public archives that will be possible in the future. The vocabulary itself must be understood. What the archival profession calls recontextualization and pluralization of records, album makers define as “their legacy” carried forward, something discussed further in the two final chapters.