

Oral history fuels Spaulding reunion success

by Kate Tsubata

When families get together, it's a chance for wisdom to be shared and stories told. Most families recognize the importance of oral history, but the Spauldings take it to the next level, creating a professional oral history video series.

At the next reunion of the Benjamin and Edith Spaulding Descendants Association (BESDA) in Raleigh, North Carolina, 600 expected attendees will view a series of videos commissioned by the family association.

"We have more than 5,000 descendants," remarked Dr. Milton Campbell, a Duke University researcher who helped spearhead the genealogical work. He followed in the footsteps of two now-deceased family members, John Spaulding and Dr. Louis Mitchell, who, in 1989, compiled a volume detailing branches of the family tree from 1810.

"With the help of Duke University, we compiled a more exact outline of descendants, although we're constantly adding to it as we discover new information," Campbell explained.

In two centuries and nine generations, descendants spread from North Carolina, often settling near other family members. The family association chose a professional video production team, LightSmith Productions, owned by the husband/wife team of SunJae and Mie Smith, "to capture our stories," said BESDA president and COO, Vincent Spaulding. "Besides a highly professional team, LightSmith focuses on productions with a positive message. That fit our vision, and our family's approach. The LightSmith team traveled to five main locations to interview 50 elders and significant groundbreakers. Beginning in Washington, DC, the team traveled to Durham, North Carolina, and Columbus and Bladen Counties in the southeastern corner of North Carolina. They traveled to Whitesboro, New Jersey, where Congressman George Henry White founded the town as a haven for people of color to attain self-sufficiency. Finally, they interviewed family members in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

LightSmith pre-interviewed each subject by phone, to be familiar with the details of each story. Interviewees were asked to complete a form with names, dates and key events, to ensure correct attribution later. In this way, each person already prepared details to include in their reminiscences. Clear communication and good organization helped utilize every minute of shooting time to best advantage.

"In each day of shooting, we were able to film eight to 12 family members for the history segments," remarked Vincent. "Relatives worked together to arrange transportation, food and locations, so it all went smoothly."



Walter Benjamin Spaulding reminisces about his youth and adult years, as well as stories passed by his parents and grandparents.

To take best advantage of being in each location, LightSmith and BESDA members fielded a second camera team to get high-quality footage of significant landmarks. They filmed family businesses and farms, homes and schools, historical markers and cemeteries. With a knowledgeable local family member driving, SunJae Smith shot several dozen locations while interviews were being conducted. "Often, people forget the importance of getting good-quality footage of places referred to in stories," he said. "Or they intend to go back and do it later, and it just never happens. LightSmith also used specialized equipment to photograph family artifacts, and other equipment to scan historical photos and documents. "Archival-quality



Former Washington, DC, Councilman William Spaulding is wired by soundman Kensei Tsubata while Camera operator Mie Smith frames the shot. Interviewer Kate Tsubata is on the right.

images helped support the video stories, and are now usable for family records," Mie Smith explained. "We tried to anticipate the family's needs, and get everything at one go."

The interviews were set up indoors; the camera crew created a studio environment in homes, churches or community centers. Lighting and backdrops were set up, with several microphones to capture the desired sound and filter out unwanted sound.

The hardest part of the job, as professionals will tell you, is the post-production editing. Taking out the superfluous material – such as the interviewer's questions or the flubbed statements – editors divided each interview into segments according to topic. They devised multi-dimensional animated images for the chapter breaks, added music, and inserted titling to identify speakers or locations.

LightSmith then compiled the highlights into a short inspirational video about family history. Combining first-person narratives, illustrated with shots of family locations and artifacts, the Spaulding Family Legacy video is a moving tribute to the 200 years of family members' accomplishments. Among those whose stories were captured: the first African American to pilot Air Force One, Col. John Mitchell; internationally-known author and speaker Stedman Graham; 1993-1998 Deputy Undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture Dallas Smith; Black Professional Firefighters Association founder Romeo Spaulding; and dozens of others with equally impressive credentials.



Vincent Spaulding, BESDA President, and Luke Campbell, Co-Chair, 2012 Reunion helping scan historical images.

"We tried to anticipate questions future generations might ask, and make sure we gave them answers," said Vincent, who oversaw the entire project. "Knowing how people raised food, bartered for everything, worked hard to get an education, and then turned around and helped the next ones down the line ... this is important for succeeding generations to recognize."

"If you think about it, each family has a specific window on the events of our world," said LightSmith's Mie Smith. "When we can capture unique stories from each person, we understand not only how events affected the family, but how the family affected history. As new generations come along, knowing what their ancestors experienced helps define their own identity."

Oral history projects go hand-in-hand with family reunions. "It's like taking all those wonderful nuggets of information that are exchanged and collecting them together in a concise form so everyone can keep them – they're never lost," Ms. Smith explained. "The family Bible used to be where the recordkeeping stopped, then maybe a photo album or diary. Today, the DVD can retain not only someone's face, but gestures, voice, words and personality. Shouldn't we use this technology so families can preserve these memories for the centuries to come?"

For more information about how an oral history project can be carried out, check the website: www.lightsmithpro.com, or the BESDA website: www.spauldingfamily.com.

About the author

Kate Tsubata is a freelance journalist specializing in education and family issues.

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