



Tracy Briggs / The Forum

After years of inspiration, Valerie Monson founded History Catchers, a Fargo-based business that helps families save their loved ones' stories, photos and memories.

Saving stories that matter

Fargo woman helps families save memories through 'documentary of you'

BY TRACY BRIGGS
The Forum

FARGO

Maybe it happened at your Thanksgiving table. You're stuffed (but saving room for pie) when an older relative — an aunt, a grandfather, a great-grandmother suddenly launches into a story from long ago.

Perhaps it's about the blizzard of '66 or the time your uncle climbed his hometown water tower just to prove he could, or how your mom and her sisters told ghost stories on the porch of the old farmhouse — the one with the squeaky door that made every tale a little spookier.

And someone at the table inevitably says it:

"We really should write this down."

Most of us never do.

Valerie Monson is building a business around that moment.

Monson, 52, is the founder of History Catchers, a Fargo business devoted to capturing family histories on video, in audio recordings or in written mini-biographies. She interviews loved ones, scans old photographs and assembles curated documentaries that families can keep for generations.

She calls it "A documentary of you."

But the idea wasn't born in a business meeting. It began years ago with one petite woman who kept a train station running in the middle of the Spanish flu pandemic.

The tiny heroine who planted the seed

Monson said that while she grew into a historian in her 30s, the first seed was planted when she was around 11, when her father handed her a cassette recorder and told her to interview her 86-year-old great-grandmother, Mabel, about her life.

One story Mabel told her was astonishing.

During the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, the Northern Pacific depot in Dilworth, Minnesota, was nearly shut down when all the workers fell ill, except Mabel — a 20-year-old stenographer barely over 5 feet tall.

"She was the sole remaining staff member who could go to work," Monson said.



Contributed / Valerie Monson

Monson's great-grandmother Mabel is pictured on her wedding day in 1922.

For nearly two weeks, her great-grandmother became the entire workforce, keeping the station operational as conductors and passengers arrived expecting a full crew. They'd ask, "Where's the station manager? And who the hell are you?"

Years later, she still seemed miffed at the rudeness, telling her great-granddaughter, "I didn't care for that."

Afterward, a railway official traveled from Minneapolis to personally thank her for her dedication.

The story might have died with Mabel — if not for that interview.

"That was the first time I realized the power of capturing someone's story," Monson said. "It would have been lost."

An idea grows

Two decades later, in

the early 2000s, Monson, who grew up in Bismarck, flew to Phoenix to spend a week with her grandparents.

She brought a laptop and tried to interview her grandmother about her past. But her grandmother didn't want to be filmed or have her voice recorded.

"She did fill out a little



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Valerie Monson said you can learn about an era but only loved ones can tell their story of living at that time.

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booklet I'd given her, with a question for every day of the year," Monson said. "She filled it out religiously. It's so precious."

Her grandmother lived to 97. Those written responses — along with the conversations — became the closest thing the family has to a biography.

After that trip, Monson told herself she wanted to do this work for others someday.

But life intervened. For the next 20 years, the NDSU education graduate worked in customer service and banking. She made close friends and built a life in Fargo.

And then, in 2018, her father died suddenly at 69, just two months before retiring.

"He was our bridge to past generations," she said. "We knew his stories. But we didn't write them down."

She shakes her head at the memory.

"When he died, that knowledge died with

him," she said.

The regret — sharp and fresh — convinced her it was finally time to act on the dream that had been percolating since childhood.

A business built on listening

Monson launched History Catchers in 2024, working with a business advisor at the North Dakota Small Business Development Center who told her, "There's nothing you can't do."

Today, Monson walks into living rooms and sits at kitchen tables to ask people about their lives. She prepares clients in advance with sample questions, such as "What was your first memory?" "What modern technology changed your life?" and "What message do you want to leave for your grandchildren?"

She also asks them to find a few favorite photos to include in their video biography.

Some clients want their hair just so. Some want to reminisce for three hours. Some cry. Some laugh. Some, like one woman, insisted on



Contributed / Valerie Monson

Interviewees can dictate how long the interviews last and whether they want to be on camera.

meeting outside her home so her husband wouldn't be puttering around in the background.

Others want to have children and grandchildren with them during the interview, and almost always, a moment happens that surprises the family.

"Every single experience I've had, someone says, 'I never knew that,'" Monson said. "I just never get sick of it."

She understands why elders sometimes hesitate.

"They're shy, and you don't draw attention to yourself and you don't brag," she said. "Our culture is just strong and silent."

But she also knows the value of hearing — really hearing — someone tell their story.

"There's something so special about watching their face when they describe things, and

seeing the inflection in their voice and the accent," she said.

Monson knows many people feel intimidated by cameras or unsure where to start. That's why she emphasizes working at the storyteller's pace, letting them dictate how their history is told. Packages start around \$250.

But whether you hire her or do it yourself, Monson wants families to understand this holiday season, as relatives settle in and the stories start to flow, the time is now to save the stories before it's too late.

"History is so fragile, it's so fragile," she said. "You can make friends with an era, but you're not going to get your grandma's story from anyone else. When it's gone, it's gone."

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