

# THE books OF life



Documentary filmmaker Loren Stephens has helped people write legacy books of their own personal and family stories.

## Memoirs of everyday people prove everyone has a tale to tell

By Brett Johnson

**Y**ou're the one, they told Dorothy Stein Gould. Her siblings Becky and Martin had long said that she should be the one to tell the family's story of growing up as poor Russian Jewish immigrants in Ventura during the Depression and war-torn 1940s.

"They had both pleaded with me: 'You've got the memory. Let's record our life,'" Dorothy, now 84, recalled. "But we never did it."

Then Martin died and, later, Becky. Soon after, in 2005, Dorothy's husband, Joe, who also had urged her to do a book, died.

Amid such losses, and with the years marching on, telling her family's story gained impetus.

Standing on the steps of one of her old haunts, Ventura's City Hall, on a recent summer afternoon, Dorothy had the family's legacy in hand. She was clutching her book "You've

See LEGACY BOOKS on D9



The cover of "You've Come A Long Way, Baby," a memoir by former Ventura resident Dorothy Stein Gould, shows Gould with her husband, Joe, in their 1947 Chevrolet, a wedding gift he gave her.



Photo illustration by Joseph A. Garcia / Star staff

Documentary filmmaker Loren Stephens, left, owner of Write Wisdom Inc. who has helped people write legacy books about their own personal stories, poses with client Dorothy Gould outside Ventura City Hall, the old courthouse, where Gould once worked.



# Woman helps others write stories about their lives

## LEGACY BOOKS

From D1

Come A Long Way, Baby." The title harkens back to the days when her dad called her Baby as the youngest of eight in a blended family that came together out of tragedy — a somber version of "The Brady Bunch."

Dorothy's book is not destined for the best-seller's list, nor is it likely to find bookstore shelf space. It may never even be marketed. And she could care less. She's tapped into a bit of a trend called legacy books.

These can be memoirs, broaden into family histories, focus only on a portion of a life (such as an adventure) or fall anywhere therein. The idea is to get someone's story on record before it's too late, so it can be passed on to future generations. As Dorothy says in her preface, she wants something to remember her by for her kids and grandkids.

People may know important family dates, names and the like but often find they know little beyond that, said Loren Stephens, a former documentary filmmaker who assisted with Dorothy's book.

Stephens, who like Dorothy lives in Los Angeles, quit her film career to start a full-time business working on such books. She calls herself many things — ghost writer, teacher, coach, facilitator and memoirist.

Gould's is the 10th such legacy book Stephens has done. She's working on one with a man who served at both the Normandy invasion in World War II and at Da Nang during the Vietnam War.

She just finished another involving a Holocaust survivor who hadn't talked about the ordeal for 60-plus years. He wanted his kids to know the story but found it hard to tell them directly.

Such books largely are for family, friends and colleagues. Almost all will never see the mass market, Stephens noted. A few with wider reach might end up in a local historical archive.

### Mining the past

Originally, Stephens started doing the books as a way to raise money to finance her films. She was the executive producer of the Emmy-nominated PBS documentary "Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist" (narrated by Burt Lancaster), as well as films on African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth and Latino folk traditions in the Rio Grande Valley.

Then several years ago, she did a book with her mother on her life story.

The book provided solace and



Joseph A. Garcia / Star staff

Former Ventura resident Dorothy Stein Gould recalls stories about growing up in Ventura and working at the old courthouse. Gould recently wrote a memoir "You've Come A Long Way, Baby."

comfort as her mother's health failed and she neared death (in 2006)

— for the whole family.

"We'd read to her from the book," Stephens recalled. "Sometimes, the memories from the book were clearer to her than what happened yesterday."

That shared joy inspired Stephens to do it full time.

"Her happiness at having done it," Stephens said, "has been tremendous motivation for me to do this with other people."

Typically, Stephens conducts 10 to 12 taped interviews (each lasting two hours), crafts two drafts and ultimately a final manuscript — all in consult with the client.

The process can take six to eight months, and it isn't cheap — a full ride, from first interview to book in hand, can cost \$15,000 to \$18,000, Stephens said.

Some people just want transcripts of the interview tapes — for around \$5,000 — as their memory, or will take it from there and do the rest themselves.

Stephens also offers hourly rates to coach people how to write such books. She also conducts about four all-day workshops a year, telling people how to do interviews with family members, what questions to ask, how to play up the more dramatic elements of their lives and leave out the more mundane or extraneous details, as well as other pointers.

She tells people to keep questions as simple and open-ended as possible. The author-historian Studs Terkel, she noted, used to say his favorite question was, "And then what happened?"

Stephens has learned two things: Don't forget anyone and keep out

potentially inflammatory family stories.

"I don't want the book to be a bone of contention," she said.

The most common thing she hears from people is that their life stories are not interesting enough. Her response: Everyone has a story worth telling.

It worked for Dorothy Gould, who went by the name Stein when she lived in Ventura. Pointing to Stephens on the City Hall steps, Dorothy said, "I've always had a good memory, but she drew out the best of me."

### Meet the Steins

Back in Dorothy's day, the building was the county courthouse. She worked for then-District Attorney Arthur Waite from 1943 to 1947. Even now, she pointed out where the jail, the sheriff's offices, the justice of the peace office, the courtroom and her place used to be.

The attractive marble structure gleamed in the afternoon sun. "It's as beautiful as it ever was," Dorothy said.

She held her gaze and added, "I used to walk in the front way because I was so proud to work here."

Here, she met then-Gov. (and later U.S. Supreme Court Justice) Earl Warren and Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, who would later become state attorney general and governor. On a few occasions, her boss Waite introduced her to his friend Erle Stanley Gardner, the former Ventura and Oxnard lawyer who was a famous mystery writer (the Perry Mason books) by this time.

It was a long way to those Poli Street steps.

Dorothy's parents were both

### Legacy books tips

Loren Stephens' business is called Write Wisdom Inc. For more information, call 310-826-6217 or visit <http://www.writewisdom.com>.

Her next workshop likely will be in November; details will be posted online.

Stephens offered a few tips for those considering a legacy book, memoir or family history:

- Believe you have a story to tell.
- Don't self-censor. Get everything down on paper.
- Don't delay. Start tomorrow. Our future isn't promised.
- Don't give up. Keep asking reluctant family members to participate.
- Be a nonjudgmental listener.
- If you are looking to work with Stephens or someone else like her, you need to feel a high level of comfort that the person will treat you — and/or your family's — story with grace and respect.

Russian Jews who immigrated to Chicago. Her mother, Sarah, was born in Chernobyl, her father in Zhotonir. His name was Asher Bardenstein but, in one of those vintage Ellis Island stories, the customs agent handling his citizenship papers there decided it wasn't a good American name and gave him the new moniker Max Stein.

Both of her parents lost their first spouses to the 1918 flu epidemic that spread quickly through the Chicago tenements where they lived. Destitute, each sent a child to an orphanage.

It turned out to be blissful in one respect; the two children became friends at the orphanage and played matchmaker. And so the family formed "Brady Bunch" style, blending Sarah's four kids and Max's two. Sarah and Max had two children together — Dorothy was one, born in late 1923.

The Stein family moved to California in 1925, after a doctor told the parents that two of their children with respiratory problems would die if they didn't escape Chicago's harsh winters.

They lived initially in Echo Park, then Tujunga, and they moved to Ventura in 1928. At the time, Dorothy recalled, Ventura was about 8,000 people and had two grocery stores.

Her father initially was a junk hauler. Later, he set up a sanitary supply business in Ventura, selling towels, toilet paper and cleaning materials to hotels and service stations.

"Anything to be in America,

huh?" Stephens observed of the family's varied travails. "It's a classic immigrant's story."

### Community spirit

The family was poor, Dorothy noted, but they took in others less fortunate during the Depression. They lived on Meta Street, near police headquarters, and the chief would often send people to the Steins' for a hot meal and a place to clean up.

Her mother, Dorothy writes, would send the police chief a bottle of the wine she made for Pesach — Passover — even if it was during Prohibition.

Her father became a driver in the small local Jewish community, helping establish the Ventura County Jewish Council. That later evolved into Temple Beth Torah, though her father, who died in 1946, didn't live to see the day the synagogue officially was established.

"Looking back," Dorothy writes, "I realized how hard my parents worked and how much they struggled."

During World War II, the family kept up with the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps through the Yiddish paper *The Forward*, which the Steins got because her mother couldn't read English.

In the book, Dorothy scolds the mainstream U.S. press for not reporting the tragedy's full extent. She suspects that members of her family back in Russia died in concentration camps, though she notes she has no official records to prove it.

Dorothy moved to Los Angeles after getting married in the fall of 1947. She loved working at the Ventura courthouse and tried to get into a law school but found many slots were being held for returning GIs, she writes.

She and Joe had two sons and eventually three grandchildren. Dorothy became active in the Jewish community and PTAs, and once led the fight to save land around Dodger Stadium when it was built in the early 1960s.

"I wasn't against Dodger Stadium per se," she writes, "but I was against taking away the park land."

She and Joe also hosted foreign exchange students at their home, some 20 students over 25 years.

"I am reminded of my own parents," she writes, "who during the worst of the Depression opened their home to those who were in need of a home-cooked meal and a place to wash up. ... The seed of giving to others was planted so many years ago in the soil of Ventura."