

I Still Do Low-Tech Research in a High-Tech World

By
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In the interest of full-disclosure, I am a low-tech person. I don't own a cell phone or have e-mail. I have never used the Internet. I take notes by hand on 4"x 6" cards so I can shuffle them around and group them by year, decade, or subject when I get to the manuscript phase. I write first drafts on recycled grey menu-placemats which were headed to a dumpster after major menu changes at a restaurant I once worked at. It's not that I don't use a computer. I only use one for the word-processing function. Being a veteran user of typewriters and the literal cut-and-paste work while writing and rewriting, I fully appreciate the electronic equivalent and the spelling/grammar functions.

As a former reporter for the now-defunct *Suburban Advertiser* newspaper, I am well grounded in the five w's and one h: who, what, why, when, where, and how. I am also focused on searching out corroborating sources to make details and facts as accurate as possible. Whether I am working on a book manuscript or an article, I look for as complete a picture as I can unearth on a person, business, church, school, civic or social organization, or the Borough of Malvern.

There are still plenty of hand-written diaries and journals, old postcards, letters, organization minute books, photographs, scrapbooks, and magazines from the 19th and 20th centuries, which have not made it yet to anyone's computer. Some items, such as a personal journal from the 1800s, are too fragile to be handled and copied. Some mixed-decade collections of newspaper clippings saved on a single page present contrast issues incompatible with computers.

These primary and secondary sources are ripe for a research shovel, and I'm still using mine, as I have since 1983, when the Malvern Historical Commission was established. While the wealth of historical information available on a computer certainly is intriguing and valuable, having the original materials at hand to touch, to turn over and examine, to read, add sensory dimensions to a research project. I am currently gathering information for my third book about the Borough of Malvern, *Malvern Treasures: In the Company of Malvern Borough Women*. Over the past three years, I have found material to put on more than 1100 4"x6" note cards about females involved with women's and community groups since 1909. I am using many of the sources described below.

MINUTES

After reading the minutes of three women's organizations, founded in 1909, 1930, and 1950, I feel more connected to those earlier times with their cultural nuances and then-current issues and attitudes. I find that minutes, scrapbooks, and yearbooks describe the structures and purpose of an organization. Meeting minutes also describe a group's membership, activities, social events, and language in use at various times. They demonstrate community values by which local and national charitable organizations and individuals the women chose as the recipients of their volunteer service and the proceeds from their numerous fundraisers.

FROM PHOTOGRAPHS AND POSTCARDS TO PHONE BOOKS

Photographs show how meeting rooms and members looked over the years, many times fleshing out cryptic notes in a set of minutes. Those from various decades show how commercial and residential buildings have changed in appearance. Pictures also show changes in clothing and vehicular styles or the ways special events have been celebrated.

Postcards illustrate landscapes, streets, and buildings through time on the fronts, and, if lucky, personal messages on the back. The Chester County Historical Society (CCHS) has a fabulous photo collection, along with postcards, maps, and other graphic materials. Phonebooks, aside from providing me with a well-used perpetual calendar, show old phone numbers, including party lines, and old names and addresses.

Newspaper articles based on press releases show the organizational view designed to be put before the public. Details not found in the minutes, because of assumptions that members already knew them, frequently appeared in newspapers. For example, I was curious what the booths were for a 1957 women's club bazaar mentioned repeatedly in a set of minutes, but never named or described. Thankfully a newspaper clipping gave me the answers: white elephant, kitchen cupboard, arts and crafts, children's clothes, doll clothes, children's rides, grab bag, Sweet 'n Sour, plants, refreshments, balloons, and used toys.

PROPERTY DEED RESEARCH

Deed research, through the Chester County Recorder of Deeds' office and the Chester County Archives, certainly provides a time line back through the various property divisions, bequests, foreclosures, and sales over the years, as well as the vastly changing property values. In the mid-1980s, I researched and charted by hand more than 2,000 deeds of properties on East and West King Street, Monument Avenue, and a number of other streets and avenues in the Borough. Once the owners' names are available from those deeds, additional information about them and their families frequently can be found at the CCHS and the county archives.

CITIZEN INFORMATION

Public information about a citizen most likely will be in an obituary, usually providing a wealth of detail. Sometimes this provides the only personal details available about that person.

Perhaps a will is uncovered listing all personal and business effects, as well as property owned. There might be a listing of burials at the local cemeteries. Some citizens might have merited published profiles or feature stories. Other facts might be found in old report cards, yearbooks, wedding invitations, funeral remembrances, event programs, autograph albums, and so forth.

The CCHS has a fantastic clippings collection from the early 1800s to about the mid-1970s, thanks to thousands of volunteer hours of cutting and pasting over the decades. (The society also has newspapers and census records on microfilm.) The clippings not only cover individuals, but all aspects of life in the county and its municipalities. But, what then?

I donated my reporter's scrapbooks to the Malvern Historical Commission, full of the articles I wrote and the photos I took about the Borough from 1975 to the mid-1980s. For 25 years, I have clipped and filed countless obituaries, property transfers, feature news articles, and advertisements about the Borough from two daily newspapers, and an occasional local magazine. This effort has added to the Borough's printed history beyond that available at the CCHS.

BUSINESSES

Those citizens who have run businesses might not have owned those properties, but rented them. Some may have rented their homes, also. From my collection of paper materials on Malvern Borough, I recently pulled together more than 40 sources about businesses other than property deeds. With this collection, I could trace many businesses that occupied various notable buildings on along King Street

There were published lists of local businesses for each decade from the 1890s to the 1940s. Also available in the Malvern Historical Commission files were a 1912 woman's club cookbook, a local church's 1917 souvenir dedication program, and a 1929 county list of businesses by municipality. I had copies of the books published for the borough's 50th

anniversary in 1939 and the 75th in 1964. All these pieces contained a number of local business ads. Neither of the subsequent books, published in 1989 and 2006, had any advertising.

Just a week ago, I discovered information about the man who built the structure housing a residence and a pharmacy in 1910. After his death, the family sold the business several times, but held on to the property until 1949. With advertisements and other data, I was able to establish a chronological list of druggists who ran the pharmacy over the years.

From more recent decades, there are business association newsletters and newspaper inserts, again with advertisements. However, even with all these sources, I cannot pinpoint the locations of more than half the businesses. Missing information includes street addresses, types of businesses, and data on the owners. Many of these names appeared only once on a list or in an ad through the decades, showing the transient nature of many commercial establishments

DONATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

I am so grateful to two defunct women's organizations for giving items their officers and members saved over the years to the Malvern Historical Commission. Although there are a few small and large gaps in the information the Clubs donated, enough remains to reconstruct their significant histories. Everything is worth saving, from formal minutes to scrapbooks to cookbooks.

Artifacts are invaluable, such as a milk bottle from Weaver's Dairy once located at the northwest corner of South Warren and Monument Avenues or an old moneybag from the National Bank of Malvern, located at the southwest corner of King Street and South Warren Avenue since 1887. An engraved shovel, recently discovered in a Borough closet, was used at the 1928 groundbreaking for the former Monday Afternoon Club of Malvern building at the northwest corner of West First and South Warren Avenues.

HIGH-TECH RESEARCH AND INFORMATION PRESERVATION

As an example of the changes since the early 1980s, one of my first major Malvern history projects then was to transcribe a multi-volume journal, hand-written from 1835 to 1898 by David Evans. He grew up on a farm in the middle of Willistown Township. At mid-life, he bought an existing lumber business to run and acres of land to develop in what was then known as West Chester Intersection. There he initially resided in a house he had purchased with the business. Later he built a now-demolished frame house at the southwest corner of Roberts Lane and Channing Avenue. Intersection was renamed Malvern in 1873 and became a Borough in 1889.

I transcribed ten of the 12 journals on yellow legal pads, using the CCHS's requisite pencil. This was a time-consuming project. It was extended by the care needed in handling the very fragile documents and the time needed to slowly and deliberately decipher the man's handwriting. I was not able to definitively determine all of his words and phrases.

Periodically I would type batches of those pages, ending up with 1,345 double-spaced sheets. Then I would reproduce them and distribute the copies to the historical commission members for their review and comments. Being able to transcribe material directly to a laptop today and then to a printer and/or e-mail cuts to the chase in no time at all. I was not able to finish this project due to deadlines I had to meet for the 1989 Centennial book and to later demands on my time.

Compared to the 1980s, today I know enough about computers to request help from the techies in my world, those younger than I am who have used computers most, if not all, of their lives. They have unearthed original copies of history books, a gardening book, and cookbooks related to Malvern Borough, old postcards, and artifacts from the long-gone Weaver's Dairy and

the Charles E. Hires rootbeer and condensed milk businesses. They located information on a vacuum cleaner made in the early 1900s that had been donated to the historical commission by a Green Street resident who now belongs to the commission.

They have also scanned photographs and artists' drawings onto CDs in order to preserve the materials and to transmit them in various formats when needed for printing a coloring book, a brochure, or a new book. Historical Commission minutes and an occasional original historical article are posted on the Borough's website. They found a commercial site, which provided the historical commission with reasonably priced custom-designed magnets in ample time to be sold at a local festival. This past summer I designed, picked the graphics, and researched and wrote the text for a new walking tour brochure about the Borough. The techies translated my work into the professional form needed to make enough copies commercially for distribution around the Borough.

SEEKING THE MOST ACCURATE INFORMATION

For want of a truly thorough proofreading, I am responsible for a few inaccuracies in the two Malvern books I authored and edited. For example, in one, I had two different years identified with one event. By not noticing a missing decimal point, I made a \$1.3 million Malvern water system sale into one for \$13 million. Oversights by others in earlier books put an 1873 library organizational meeting in a house that wasn't built until 1884-1885.

For decades, it was published and republished that David Evans founded the town. Present-day research challenges that declaration, using sources such as previously published books and histories, David Evans' journal both for what was in and not in it, period newspaper articles, and some basic common sense. I find it is far better to double-check research than to always assume that what I've read or heard for decades is true.

It could become a great new adventure finding new or additional information in a Malvern Historical Commission file, or at the Chester County Historical Society and Chester County Archives collections in West Chester, or in someone's garage and attic, or even the Internet. Right now I'm just working hard so I can start writing the first draft of the new book.

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