

Migration Heritage and Writing Family Memoirs and Object Stories

Personal accounts of migration and settlement in Australia are an important part of Australia's history, and of regional and family histories. They are treasured memories to hand on from one generation to the next, and they add the voice of real experience to the texture of larger national histories. As Australia's post war migrants age, it is vital that their experience of migration and settlement is recorded for their families and for historians in the future.

There are many ways of recording migration stories. They can be documented in many formats, on paper, film, tape, and through photos, sketches and art works. In addition, stories around objects and photos are a powerful way to reveal sometimes forgotten aspects of migration heritage. Writing down the stories and memories of photos and migration heritage objects is often a good way to start documenting your family's migration story, and handing it on to the next generation.

Writing Family Memories of the Migration Experience

Consider focussing recollections around key themes or topics:

Memories of home, how and why you had to leave home, preparing to leave, regrets or memories about things and people left behind, why you came to Australia, the journey, first impressions, hostels and first accommodation on arrival, how and why did you come to the Orange region, work, home, food, shopping, language, religion, recreation, crafts, music, making do, building a new family life, making friends; keeping customs, language and traditions alive, getting to know Australians, when you first felt you were Australian, reflections on the Australian landscape or the environment of Orange, what you like about living in Orange (or dislike) and reflections on how Orange has changed since you arrived.

These topics are just suggestions. Every journey is different, that's what makes your memories so important.

Migration heritage stories are not just a series of facts. Recollecting feelings, textures, colours, sound, taste and emotions will help bring your memories alive. Where possible include anecdotes, be specific about memories of particular places such as the workplace, what the rooms were like in the hostel, the first night spent in Australia, or a memorable meal whether good or bad.

Documenting Migration Heritage Objects

Photos and objects are a focus for recovering often hidden aspects of family life. They are a particularly important aspect of migration history. Migration heritage objects and photos carry important memories and associations with home, with the journey, and with the challenges of establishing a new life in a strange country. Objects can help us tap into forgotten parts of every day life, and family and community history.

But the meaning and associations of objects are easily lost if the memories of those who used and kept the object are not written down. Photos may be hard for the next generation to understand if the details about the time and place, and who is in the photo are not written down. Recording the stories and memories around migration heritage objects and photos is one of the most important things you can do to pass on unique and important family history to the next generation.

What are migration heritage objects?

Many different kinds of objects help to tell the personal stories of migration and settlement. They may be precious items carried from overseas, such as family heirlooms, tools of trade or domestic objects. They can be simple things such as suitcases that evoke memories of journeys, and help to tell a story about the process of migration and settlement.

Migration heritage objects may also be items that have been made or purchased in Australia, such as things that keep cultural traditions and practices alive, items marking important phases in establishing a new life and home, or items associated with life in migrant hostels.

Use these prompt questions to explore the stories and associations of objects, and to write about their meaning and significance. Not all these questions will be relevant to your object. You may only know the answers to a few of these questions, but the object story may still be important.

Remember these questions are just a guide, not the limits of what might be covered in an object story.

Who used the object? If possible, ask family members for their recollections, or, if it is a museum object, ask the donor for their memories.

- What was the owner like? How is it connected with the owner?
- Why is it important to your family or museum? How is it valued? What meaning does it have for you? What feelings or ideas are evoked by the object?
- How or why has the object been kept? How has it been passed to other owners?
- Where was it used? What space, room, building, or locality was it used in?
- What was the function or purpose of the object, or what work did it do?
- Why was it needed? Why was it useful or important?
- What impact did the object have on work processes, the environment, and the economy?
- How was the object used?
- What steps are involved in using the object?
- What other tools, objects, or equipment was it used with?
- What skills were needed to use the object?
- If the actual owner is not known, who generally used or owned such objects?
- How long was it in use? When did it stop being used and why?
- What is important or distinctive about the design of the object? How has it changed or stayed the same?
- Where does this design fit within a class or group of similar items?
- Does the object relate to an important theme or aspect of the history of the district? If so how?
- Is there a photo of the owner? Is there a photo of the object in use, or a photo of the place where it was used?

Where possible, keep your notes with the object. If you are writing the story of a family object, remember to include a description of what the object looks like, as it is easy for the written notes to become separated from the object. Also sign and date the story so future readers will know who wrote the notes and when.

Useful Resources

One Memory at a time: Inspiration and advice for writing your family story – by D G Fulford
Legacy: A step-by-step guide to writing personal history – by Linda Spence
How to write your own life story – by Lois Daniel