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The Story of My Life, Starring...Me!

Boomers Hire Pros to Make Hollywood-Style Biopics; Dubbing in a Daughter-in-Law

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First there was the big-budget Hollywood movie. Now comes the big-budget home movie.

As their parents hit old age, baby boomers are scrambling against time to make a permanent record of the family lore. But instead of picking up a video camera and firing off a list of questions, some boomers are hiring production companies to turn these tales into glossy documentaries.

Now, when mom reminisces about her high-school sweetheart, her story may be set to carefully selected theme music. And when dad recounts his first job out of college, it may be done with the help of a voiceover. Some families are hiring genealogists to do background research or paying for historical footage, such as shots of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. These stylized home movies can run as long as an hour and cost \$20,000.

Dozens of companies have sprung up in the past few years to make video biographies of the non-at-all famous. It's still a nascent industry – many of the busiest companies do only a couple of biographies a month – but they say clients are increasingly asking for more expensive pieces. Plunging prices on digital cameras and editing software has made it easier to get into the business. Meanwhile, established video companies that specialize in weddings and bar mitzvahs are adding biographies to their product lists.

Ed Mitchell, who started a clothing store in Westport, Conn., back in 1958, just finished appearing in the movie version of his life, “Second to None: We Started with Three Suits; The Ed Mitchell Story.” His family hired Reel Biography to make the film, as a tribute to the 98-year-old family patriarch. A crew of four spent two days taking footage of the shop and interviewing Mr. Mitchell’s family, friends and customers. The result was two videos, 10-minute and 30-minute versions.

Filming for the “Second to None” had some of the trappings of a Hollywood shoot, from the makeup and hair touchups to the tedious set arranging. At one session, Mr. Mitchell’s two sons, Bill and Jack, redo again and again what will be the introduction to the film.

Take one: Bill stumbles over his words. Take 2: The cameraman tells Bill he is smacking the microphone with his gesticulations, ruining the sound. Take 3: The more gregarious Bill hogs the spotlight. “We want Jack to say something too,” the producer says. Take 4: They nail it. “It is beyond words and my capacity to thank you, Dad,” Bill begins.

The Documentary Boom

It’s perhaps not surprising that people who have had to suffer through hours of boring, shaky footage of weddings, birthday parties and European vacations are looking for alternatives. And the popularity of

programs like A&E Biography and Ken Burns's PBS documentaries has put ideas in people's heads about the possibilities.

Some video-biography companies say they have picked up on yet another factor to all this: Boomers were so busy rebelling in their youth that they didn't pay much attention to these family stories – which now makes them more inclined to go all out to document them.

As the masses start commissioning their own biopics, video biographers are coming out of the woodwork. Membership in the Association of Personal Historians, which represents print and video biographers, has jumped 65% in the past two years to 330 members. The association – anyone who pays \$100 can join – now includes social workers, ex-actors, even a private eye.

People commission biographies for a variety of reasons, including birthday parties and anniversaries, or as tributes to the dying or recently deceased. In Mr. Mitchell's case, the impetus was the renovation of his store. But whatever the occasion, the aim is usually to leave descendants with a rosy picture of the subject. The reality: It doesn't always work out quite that way.

The documentary about Brian O'Keeney, a restaurant owner from Egg Harbor Township, N.J., includes aerial footage of the town to Northern Ireland where he was born, and photomontages (one set to the song "Born to Be Wild") of his wedding day and ski trips. It also features intimate interviews with the 50-year-old's family and friends. But what most struck his 17-year-old daughter, Ashleen, was something very different.

"Those pictures of him in those big black glasses?" she says. "He looked like such a dork."

Some of the video companies can help with this – by recreating your past. If clients don't have original photos, videographers can take current footage and then delete decades by transforming it to black and white, adding a sepia tinge, and inserting a few scratches.

One family came to Perry Cowen and wanted him to manufacture some shots of their kids as infants in the 1940s. "I didn't show the whole face (of the mom) and we got the digital clocks out of the room," says Mr. Cowen, CEO of Once Upon a Time Video Productions, a biography company in Maple Grove, Minn. His company charges between \$2,000 and \$4,000 for a 30-minute biography.

Other biographers often get next-day "oops" calls from clients. One of Anne Nissen's customers was so concerned about the fact that she hadn't mentioned one of her daughter-in-laws in the movie that the client had the Columbia, Md.-based biographer speak a few words of apology onto the end of the film.

Bury the Past

Brad Flickinger, founder of MyVideoStory.com in Port Townsend, Wash., has come up against a different situation: a customer eager to bury a piece of the past. Mr. Flickinger tells the story of a couple in their 70s that hired him to create their video biography. When he asked about their most embarrassing moment, they told him (and the camera) the story of a Halloween night in the 1950s when they got arrested for lighting a tire on fire and rolling it down a neighborhood street.

"They called the next day and said, 'Please take that out,'" Mr. Flickinger says. "They said 'We don't want our grandkids to know we ever got arrested.'"

This Is Your (Video) Life

Dozens of companies will now do personal video biographies for regular people. Here are a few of them, and some of what they offer:

COMPANY	PRICE	WHAT THEY OFFER	COMMENT
Farnese Video Biographies Blackwood, N.J.	\$3,500 to \$6,000	Quick MTV-style editing, on-location shoots	Run by a husband-and-wife team. He is a sports cameraman. She is a psychologist (who does the interviews)
Once Upon a Time Video Productions Maple Grove, Minn.	\$2,000 to \$20,000	Biography incorporates old movies, videos, newspaper clippings	Will recreate old scenes and photographs
Reel Biography New York, N.Y.	\$2,000 to \$20,000	Service of a genealogist, historical archival footage, experienced journalists	Founder Marco Greenberg launched the company after losing a friend in the 9/11 attacks
MyVideoStory.com Port Townsend, Wash.	\$300 to \$1,000	The cheaper price gets you a 15-minute video covering big milestones such as career, marriage and children with five historical photos	Owner is a former newspaper publisher, also sells training CDs to other aspiring video biographers
Infinity Productions Sunnyvale, Calif.	\$800 to \$4,000	One-hour video, most of which is a one-on-one interview with the subject, adds photographs, music and captions	Director of Biographies, Molly Rathbun, writes out detailed lists of personalized questions