

What's It Like [. . .] in Morrison County, Minnesota?

A Project of the Morrison County Historical Society

Project Description

Project Rationale: MCHS staff are often asked to conduct oral history interviews. While such interviews are historically valuable and, indeed, were the genesis of the Morrison County Historical Society, they take an immense amount of time. From deciding who to interview to drawing up interview questions to recording, transcribing, and editing interviews, the time involved limits the number of oral histories that can be done well by existing staff and volunteers. (MCHS has a great number of cassette tapes that need to be transcribed, yet the task is so daunting that no volunteers have come forward to take it on.)

There has to be another way to collect the rich personal data of an oral history interview without all of the highly-involved steps. And there is. The autobiography, memoir, or personal essay all capture the same type of data found in oral histories and, because they are produced by individuals, they are less time-consuming for history organizations. The drawback of these individually produced writings, however, is that they take self-motivation and a desire to organize and write one's thoughts. Where does a person start? How much of one's life should be covered? Writing an autobiography can be overwhelming for even the most hardcore writers, let alone those who aren't comfortable writing.

In addition to overcoming the oral history/autobiography hurdles, MCHS was interested in finding a way to study identity issues in Morrison County. While identity issues, such as being gay or Jewish or black or conservative or poor, might appear in tangential form in the many resources we have on file at The Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum, we have yet to cover these sorts of topics directly and intentionally. It's been gravel in our shoes that this important history does not make a more focused appearance in our collections.

The combination of these factors, along with inspiration for the project title, which came from thinking about a person within a particular identity group, led to "What's It Like [. . .] in Morrison County, Minnesota?" with the space inside the brackets to be filled in with the many and varied facets of life as experienced by those who have lived in the county. (Examples: "What's it like [to be Catholic] in Morrison County?" "What was it like [to set bowling pins] in Morrison County?" "What's it like [to grow up on a farm] in Morrison County?")

Project Design: MCHS wants current and former residents of Morrison County, Minnesota, to write short essays (200-1,000 words) answering their own "What's It Like [. . .] in Morrison County?" questions. By keeping the essays limited to a specific topic and length, we hope to overcome the barriers of writing autobiographies and memoirs. We want snippets of history that, taken together, will provide a picture of the complexity of living in Morrison County.

MCHS will provide a list of potential topics including occupations, hobbies/avocations, identity descriptions, and life tasks as inspiration. (Online: See Suggested Topics menu at top of page.)

People may choose one from the list or they can create their own topic to fit with the "What's It Like" theme. People can also write more than one essay for the project. Further, the same topic can be written about by more than one person, which will allow for different perspectives on the topic.

We will collect basic demographic information on each person who submits an essay, including name, birth date, birth place, gender, contact info, dates residing in Morrison County, and date of the essay. Those submitting essays may do so in digital or handwritten form. If an essay is handwritten, MCHS staff will type it. MCHS staff will also assist with editing grammar, spelling and typos on essays, if desired.

Approval will be sought from essay writers prior to the edited versions being posted online.

MCHS will encourage essay writers to discuss both the positives and negatives of their situations and will provide a list of starter questions to give writers direction. (Online: See Writer's Guidelines and Getting Started menus for more info.)

Project Outcomes: MCHS has set a goal of collecting a minimum of 100 "What's It Like" essays.

A "What's It Like" blog will be created, with essays being released online over the course of a year or two, longer if more essays are received. (If you're reading this online, you are most likely on the "What's It Like" blog.)

These essays will become part of the permanent collections at The Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum in Little Falls, MN, and will be on file for researchers to use. Essays on file at the Weyerhaeuser Museum will contain the full identifying demographic information.

Because these essays will appear online and MCHS wants to be sensitive to the privacy of our writers, we will allow essay writers to choose how they would like their names to appear online (full name, first name + last initial, initials, or anonymous). None of the demographic data collected from writers will appear online.

All comments to the blog will be moderated by MCHS staff so that the identities of anonymous essay writers are not accidentally or purposely revealed. Comment moderation will also prevent troll-like commentary from being made about essays.

Parental permission will be sought for essays submitted by writers under the age of 18 prior to MCHS posting such essays online. The full names of minors will not appear online, only initials or as "Anonymous."