

# Then and Now: Collecting and sharing stories

Carole West 1:53 p.m. ET Feb. 23, 2017



(Photo: Photo courtesy Patricia Longoria, Deputy Historian, Village of Cayuga Heights)

Oral histories through storytelling have been a mainstay of human populations through countless generations. As a precedent to the written word, the history and culture of a group of people were preserved through their oral histories, passed down from generation to generation.

In keeping with this tradition, last year The History Center piloted a new program whereby we sought to bring together several generations who could meet, share stories, and connect to one another. Our Generation to Generation initiative is unique in that it enlists local teens to interview elders in the community - what was it like to live in Tompkins County 60 or 70 years ago? Have the rural areas changed or stayed the same? Has Ithaca retained its small town feel in spite of being a city with an international flavor?

For the pilot program, elders were asked to relay their experiences in the 1940s, pre and during the war, through the relative calm of the 1950s that preceded the turbulent years of the 1960s. How did these decades influence their lives?

They were asked questions about local, national and world events, civil rights, and entertainment. Was the impact of these years as great on their families and the county as it was nationwide? The responses brought back memories for the elders, not always the best ones.

Several elders had vivid memories of how 1954's hurricane Hazel devastated their homes and neighborhoods in Ithaca - natural disasters can have a lasting impact that are specific to a certain community. The responses also elicited heartfelt comments from the teens, as one stated: "I want to say thank you for taking the time to share your experiences. I also want to say that we should stay in touch."

Another unique aspect to this program was the inclusion of maps. Robert Kibbee, former map librarian at Cornell University, offered his services by printing out maps of neighborhoods where elders had grown up, or currently live as adults, in order to help them with place names, streets, and also note where specific physical features or places had once been if they were no longer there.

At an initial 'meet and greet' session youth and elders were asked to draw maps of their neighborhoods - some of the results were incredibly creative!

For this year's session, we will be focusing on the Tompkins County Bicentennial. Seniors will be encouraged to share stories about living, working and studying in Tompkins County, as well as conveying their own personal and family connections to Tompkins County through specific places and events.

Continuing the theme of a joint map project, the teens and seniors will also be asked to illustrate a pre-printed map of Tompkins County as part of a Mapping Tompkins project spearheaded by the Tompkins County Historian and the Bicentennial Commission.

Also this year, elders will also be asked to relate experiences that they or family members may have to the 100th anniversary of Women's Suffrage in New York, a state-wide remembrance that we are celebrating in 2017.

Women today now take their right to vote for granted, but elders may have stories to share that shed a different light on the topic from the women in their past, possibly even from an ethnic or racial perspective.

The teens will be privy to information on this topic that they could not learn from a text book, especially as it related to women's experiences in Tompkins County. Several queries about the most recent national election and ensuing reaction from women will also be included in this year's questions.

If you are a Tompkins County teen or elder who would like more information, or to participate in this year's Generation to Generation initiative, please contact Youth Education Director Carole West at The History Center at [eightsquare@thehistorycenter.net](mailto:eightsquare@thehistorycenter.net), or 607-273-8284, x3.

*Carole West is the Youth Education Director at The History Center in Tompkins County*

Photo caption: Robert Nobles, on left, poses with interviewer Aidan Peck during last year's Generation to Generation oral history project.

Photo courtesy Patricia Longoria, Deputy Historian, Village of Cayuga Heights