

from *The Photo Scribe, A Writing Guide*
How to Write the Stories Behind Your Photographs
by Denis Ledoux

Cameo Narratives¹

Many scrapbook makers want to record more even than the *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* of their pictures. They would like to expand on the story they are telling with their photos by including a conversation, or recording an activity, or perhaps conveying the feeling of what it was like to be in a place or of a time.

All of these elements make up the texture of our daily lives. We are who we are because of everything that has happened to us—not just because of the celebratory moments that we typically capture on film but the mundane ones as well.

There is a larger story that is possible for scrapbookers to tell and the first step is to *fill in the space between the photos with narrative texts*. I call these texts “Cameo Narratives.” Cameo Narratives provide significant texture, individuality and meaning to albums, which risk being, without the stories that make our lives unique, just like anyone else’s.

Cameo Narratives are short, generally 50 to 75 words—although they can be shorter or longer. They tell *a part* of the story behind a photograph or capture in words a time or an experience that didn’t get on film. Cameo Narratives add valuable information and invaluable, rich textures of feeling and life experience to a photograph album. They make the story so much larger than any collection of photos alone can.

Cameo Narratives are a step beyond annotations in rounding out your album. In Cameo Narratives, you are providing more than just information. You are preserving details and insights that interest your audience and are often unavailable from the photo alone. (Unlike lifestories, however, Cameo Narratives don’t attempt to tell the complete story themselves.)

In writing Cameo Narratives, you approach storytelling without having to take on all of its challenges.

Writers of Cameo Narratives can start with any photo they want to start with. Work with a rough draft copy of your album until you have a finished text that you are satisfied with. Working

¹ This two-part report on Cameo Narratives has been condensed in a worksheet available from Soleil Lifestory Network: *Writing Great Cameo Narratives*. You’ll find it on our lifestory-scrapbook journaling web site at www.turningmemories.com/Photoscribe.html.

too soon in a final scrapbook limits your ability to create freely. You will be afraid of making a mess; you'll be reluctant to change things later.

At this important early stage of writing, don't even think about appropriate chronological order. Concentrate instead on individual photos and memories rather than your album as a whole. Your MemoryLists come in handy now as a stimulant and a guide. When you sit down to write, glance through your MemoryList and choose anything that strikes your fancy, or look for photos that speak to that memory and write from those photos.

Eventually as you write, you will find your Cameo Narratives accumulating. Creating an order that complements the photos you have will come naturally. Cameo Narratives can accompany your photos or stand by themselves. (Let them fill the "photo I wish I had" function!)

Together your photos and your Cameo Narratives will add up to a worthy telling of your story, a significant gift to your family, a great personal satisfaction.

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Samples of Cameo Narratives

■ Here are two Cameo Narratives that depend on dialog for their development. The first is a Cameo Narrative that is a transcript of two conversations. It focuses on creating a **character portrait** of my father. It is placed on a page which features photos of my father and me. In one of these, for instance, he is holding me as a baby on his knee, apparently in the fall of 1947 as he is wearing an overcoat and I am all bundled up in a hooded one-piece suit:

“Why didn’t Dad do the GI Bill?” my mother said to me in 1998. “He was a smart man. He could have gotten a good job if he had gone to college then. But, I guess he wasn’t interested.”

My *mémère* said to me when I was an adolescent, “We had the money to help him. He could have stayed in school. He didn’t want to.”

This Cameo Narrative reveals something about my father that is not portrayed in the young man holding his son on his lap, yet it is very important information. At that moment, undetected by the camera, he was following a path which was to have serious consequences for his life and that of his family. It explains much about him as will be revealed in later Cameo Narratives. It is part of his larger story that I want to capture in my album. I could not possibly capture it without a Cameo Narrative to add to the celebratory photo.

■ The following Cameo Narrative is not about the character of an individual but about the **character of a community**. It is a transcript of a conversation in which my father himself provides a transcript of a conversation. There is no photo to accompany this narrative.

“When I was a child down on Bates Street [the tenement district],” my father said to me, “children knew they couldn’t misbehave without everyone knowing. If someone did something, a window from a nearby apartment building would fly open and a woman would stick her head out and shout, ‘ Go home right now. You know better than to behave that

way. I'll be speaking to your mother tonight at a Ladies of St. Ann Sodality meeting. She'll want to know about what you've been doing!"

I have photos of my father making his First Communion and of him being confirmed, but none of him in any sort of daily activity in the district where he grew up. I include this Cameo Narrative among the celebratory photos because I want to give a larger sense of what his life was like at a particular point. It may be very interesting to younger readers / viewers (his grandchildren and great grandchildren) to learn that communities have not always been as anonymous or diverse in values as they are today. There was no doubt among the parents in my father's Franco-American tenement district that they all shared a common sense of what being "well brought up" meant. The woman who flung the window open didn't doubt for a moment that she and my grandmother would be in agreement and that my grandmother would welcome her intervention. What is more, she expected my grandmother to do the same thing with her own child.

■ Here are two more Cameo Narratives that fill voids in my album. They feature **setting**. In them, I describe in two separate ways the neighborhood where my father lived as an adolescent. It was uptown in an area of single homes with little yards.

The Farwell Street neighborhood reflected a change in housing patterns as mill workers left the downtown for the outlying districts. These areas of town were developing fast. Holy Family parish had been organized in 1923 but it still operated out of a basement church on Sabattus Street.

For my grandmother Ledoux, Holy Family was always a sort of temporary place, not a fit replacement for the large gothic Sts. Peter and Paul whose spires dominated the downtown skyline after 1936. She had followed the liturgy there since 1916 and that was where she continued to prefer to attend.

■ These Cameo Narratives feature both the **character** of my grandmother and the larger **setting** of the neighborhood. The second focuses more specifically on the neighborhood.

Up Farwell Street, perpendicular to it, was Highland Avenue where his mother's sister Rosilia and her husband Thomas Beaulieu lived in a house almost identical to his parents'. The Beaulieus had two sons René and Roland who were my father's age. Two houses away was another, older cousin Rosa Labourdais (her mother was Albert's aunt and godmother Ernestine Bilodeau Rioux). Rosa lived there with her husband and children. Later when Rhéa married Maurice Lavigne, they lived on Warren Avenue almost in front on the house in which the Ledoux lived.

Later, Albert was to marry the girl next door and add to this neighborhood

a set of parents-in-law and an uncle-in-law and his wife (Albin and Augustine Lessard).

These Cameo Narratives would go on a page with photos of the Ledoux on the lawn of their house at 49 Farwell St. They are the only photos I have of this period of their lives, but I want my album to record more. The story of this Cameo Narrative reveals to the viewer/reader an element of the neighborhood that a photo of smiling relatives on the side yard can't.

■ This Cameo Narrative features an **action**.

In the morning, William walked to the Bates Mill with the thousands of other operatives who descended from their tenements— in the cold dark in the winter, in the cool light in the summer— and filled the street. They came for their seven o'clock shift from New Auburn across the river, from the narrow twisted streets of Little Canada, from the area north of the park where the apartments were larger and more modern and more expensive. They filled the sidewalks and the streets, streaming to the Bates, the Hill, the Androscoggin, the Pepperell along the canal and the Continental, lower by the Androscoggin River.

In the afternoon, at 2:45, the flow was repeated as men and women came for the second shift— the late comers rubbing shoulders with the folks from the first shift as these trudged homeward for an early supper and rest.

Like all the other examples I have provided, the previous Cameo Narrative **features one element but includes others**: the narrative is based on an action, and it is strong on setting. The narrative accompanies several photos I have of my Grandfather in a group of mill operatives.

■ The following **action** piece is also an action-based narrative that is **strong on setting**. I do not have a photo to accompany this Cameo Narrative. It stands alone in my album.

Bartlett Hill was closed in the winter in those days before heavy salting and more powerful vehicles with plows. The children in the tenements would gather on an afternoon and slide down the long hill. It was a clear, smooth swath that started near where Androscoggin Avenue is today, a spot with a view of city hall, St. Patrick's Church, but not yet Sts. Peter and Paul. As Albert grew older, the church construction proceeded and the walls and spires rose above the city so that every year there was a more spectacular view from atop Bartlett Hill. The ride ended by Mailhot's sausage, a long exhilarating ride that would be the subject of conversation the next day at the school recess.

As you can see from my examples, the words you use to describe, add to and fill in the blanks between your photos provide valuable information, insight and experience. I am sure that

you have created pictures in your own mind as you've read my Cameo Narratives—even though I haven't included any photos here. Using Cameo Narratives to enhance your photo collection, you'll be able to provide your family, friends and your future self with a rich and full account of your experience.

For more information about Cameo Narratives, photoscribing your albums,
and writing lifestories, visit
<http://www.turningmemories.com>