

Help for Local Salvation Army History

The Salvation Army Museum of the West is committed to helping local corps research and preserve their history. The following was written by the Museum Coordinator to help local corps' get started on their own history projects.

Guidelines to Writing a Corps History

Contributed by Clinton Trimmer

Writing a corps history can be a daunting task, but if broken down and done step-by-step it is wholly manageable. The following are a couple of guidelines that should help you write a more effective corps history. Though not all of the guidelines are hard and fast rules, some are. Feel free to adapt them for your particular situation if need be. The following list is put in the order that usually works best. Again, if you need to change the order for your own circumstances feel, free to do so.

Decide who the intended audience is. Are you writing the history for corps members, for Salvationists who are not members of your particular corps, or for non-Salvationists? The style in which you write and the information you include may change depending on who the intended audience is.

Collect all the source material you have readily at your disposal. Along with this material also find out if there are any individuals in your corps that would be willing to be interviewed. Oral sources are often your best sources for corps events where there are still individuals with firsthand knowledge. Corps histories are difficult because they rely heavily on local sources kept by the corps or individuals in the corps. As a general rule, the more narrow the topic the more difficult it is to research. This means that corps histories are a fairly difficult topic to write because the sources may or may not be available.

Write a brief outline of the project including goals, possible sources (beyond those collected in step 2), and how the information is going to be broken down. Set measurable goals so you can track your progress. An example of a goal may be: find out who the first soldier enrolled in the corps was, and collect biographical information on that person. When identifying possible sources remember public records, such as city directories, the county clerk's office, and newspapers as some of the possible sources of information available to you. It is a good idea to put in writing how you plan to break down the information. Is the history going to be strictly chronological, biographical, topical, or a combination? When deciding how to write your history keep in mind what kind of history you enjoy reading. Your goal is to impart knowledge and encouragement through your writing, not to put people to sleep.

Keep a research journal to document everything you do. The research journal will not only give you a means of centralizing information, so that you can find it easier when you begin writing, it also helps you track your progress. The journal should consist of a complete list of sources, notes on all the sources, a place to write questions to be answered and amend goals as needed, and a section for personal journaling. Each of the sections in your journal will help you complete the project. The list of sources will give you a quick reference to see where you have gotten your information, so that in the event that you need to go back to those sources you can. The notes are where you will write down all the important information from a source.

The entire sources may not be of use to you, sometimes it is only a sentence or two that is important for your research, so take notes on the important parts and leave out the rest. (It is important that you pick a citation style and stick with it; most written histories use Chicago citation style, but it is not required if you feel more comfortable with another style. Writing guides are available at any bookstore. A good writing guide for Chicago style is Mary Lynn Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* (4th Ed.). The questions and goals section of the journal will be of use as your project develops and you find yourself asking questions of the material. This is also a good place to modify goals, or to mark accomplished goals, of the research. The reason you keep a personal journal is so you will be able to track what you have done and where you have gone. This is important because it will help keep you from back tracking on your research. If you spend three hours in a library and find nothing you need, put that in your journal. If you do find something, put that in your journal. The point is to keep track of where you have been and what you have done.

Research your corps' history. Don't assume that things have always been the way that they are now or that things were necessarily different. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is something that even the most veteran historian must be mindful. Truisms today may not have always been true. Let the sources speak for themselves. If you find something that contradicts what you assumed to be true, then your assumption is wrong. Caveats to this include if there is reason to discredit the source, if the source is contradictory to other more reliable sources, or if the source is discredited by obvious and overt bias. Make sure your research is directed at answering your research questions and fulfilling your project goals. If you allow unchecked curiosity to distract you, you will spend time looking at information that you will never be able to use. Curiosity is important in research, but if it draws you away from the goals of your project it needs to be set aside. If you find something that sparks your interest, but it doesn't help the project, make a note of it in the personal section of your research journal and come back to it after the project is over.

When it comes time to write, make sure that you are using the sources and letting the sources paint the picture. It would be impossible for you to be truly objective and unbiased, especially because you probably began writing the corps history because you are interested in it and the Army. That said, it is important that you be as objective as possible and don't let your bias get in the way of the facts. The facts will speak for themselves if you let them, so let them. Where the facts leave gaps it is your responsibility to use common sense and logic to fill in those gaps. Make sure that readers understand when you interject your personal hypothesis of what happened. Think of yourself as a tour guide guiding people from one exhibit to the other. Each exhibit can speak for itself, but people need you to take them from one to the other.

Once you are finished writing, or if you are writing in sections when you are done with a section, give it to at least two other people to read. At least one person should be someone who has knowledge of the subject to check facts and make sure that you are presenting the information correctly. You will also need someone who doesn't know your topic. This is usually a good person to edit the paper for grammar and spelling. This person will be able to read for understanding and make sure that the paper doesn't assume too much of its audience. The second person will also be the one who is able to tell you if the project captures the reader's interest or not. Remember it is not the fool who needs advisors, but the fool who thinks they don't need advisors. When the criticism starts coming in, it is usually a good idea to read through the book of Proverbs to help keep things in perspective.

After the project is finished and the corps history has been published in whatever format your corps chooses, please remember to send a copy to the Museum of the West to be kept in the archives. By sending a copy to the archives you will ensure the hard work you have put into the project will not be lost, as well as making it available to researchers.

If any part of these guidelines does not make sense, or you need some help with your project, please call the Museum of the West at (310) 544-6475 and we will be happy to help you. Please keep in mind that the territorial archives are also at the museum, and they may have some information that would be helpful to you. The Museum of the West is here to help you be successful.

Our address is: The Salvation Army Museum of the West, 30840 Hawthorne Blvd., Rancho Palos Verdes, California 90275. Our phone number is: (310) 544-6475. Or you can e-mail the Museum Curator at: misty.jesse@usw.salvationarmy.org (lotus notes).

Good luck with your project, and please feel free to contact the museum if you need any further assistance.

Phone# (310) 544-6475

E-mail: misty.jesse@usw.salvationarmy.org