

Better Health for Life from  
Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network



## Turning Memories Into a Memoir

Ten years ago, when Jeanne Tilghman's sister celebrated her 70th birthday, relatives contributed stories for a memory book. "Writing stories about my sister helped me recall other incidents in my childhood," she says. "I realized I'd better write them down before I forgot them."

A tireless volunteer for many causes in her native Allentown, the 75-year-old Tilghman brought her usual energy and organizational skills to the task of writing her own memoirs. She collected documents—including the bill for her birth at Allentown Hospital (\$81) and report cards from St. Catharine of Siena grade school. A cousin helped her with research on her mother and maternal grandparents, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia. She organized and labeled family photos.

Her project got a boost when she attended Diane Schrameyer's memoir-writing class at the Center for Healthy Aging at Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. "Hearing other people's childhood stories jogged my memory," she says. "I'd rush home from class to write down more stories."

Tilghman found it helpful to organize her memoir chronologically. After writing about her grandparents and parents, she set down her own experiences as a young child, even describing the rooms of the house she lived in until she was three. "It is amazing how one memory leads to so many others," she says. She recorded stories about family life with her parents, her sister, Teresa, and her brother, Joe.

Next came memories of her years at St. Catherine and Central Catholic and her first job at the movie theater on 19th Street. "I decided to stop my story at my high school graduation," she says. "I had already told my children most of the stories about my adult life.

"Writing my stories has shown me that I had an interesting life, with lots of highs and lows," she says. "It's fun to recall incidents involving people you love. As for the low points, like my parents' divorce, I saw how my childhood years equipped me to deal with adversity."



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### Excerpts from Jeanne Tilghman's Journal...

*A few days before Thanksgiving one year, Dad brought home a live turkey. We named her Susie and she stayed tied to the water spout on the side of the house where we visited her until on the morning of Thanksgiving when Dad chopped off her head and for a few moments, Susie ran around the yard like the proverbial "chicken without a head." Then Mother prepared her for our Thanksgiving dinner. When Susie appeared on the platter at our dinner table, it was a traumatic moment bringing tears to our eyes, but we*

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*soon had to get over it if we wanted to enjoy the individual ice cream turkey molds that Dad brought home for dessert. This was tradition for our holiday meals. Dad always brought home ice cream molds for whatever holiday it was.*

*One very poignant memory I have is when my sister, Teresa, came home on leave from cadet nurse's training at Kennedy Veterans Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. One morning she opened her mail while we were all sitting at the kitchen table and discovered she had to go immediately to Philadelphia because she had TB. I can still hear her wail of "Oh, Mother!" as if it was yesterday, and then Mother sent me to my room and the rest of the day was spent listening to Teresa and Mother packing and planning to go to Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia. I wasn't quite sure what was going on, but I knew it was something very important. Teresa was sent to White Haven in the Poconos, a TB sanitarium, and we didn't see her for a long time. Mother went often by train to see my sister and brother, Joe, and I were left to wonder what was going to happen to our sister. This was a scary time in our lives—not knowing whether our sister was ever going to return to us. As time went on, on a few occasions Dad would go to visit her and I went along. I was in high school at the time. It was frightening to see everyone wearing masks and this aura of mystery about the sanitarium.*

*The story has a happy ending—a wonder drug was discovered that cured tuberculosis—my sister recovered. Sanitariums around the country all closed down. There was even one down in Center Valley. I will always think of that time in my life when what was happening to my sister was most frightening and the words "Oh, Mother!" are ingrained in my memory forever.*



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