

So many festive events, so little time.

While it is VERY bad form to work on your laptop while sitting on the couch in the middle of a holiday meal or party, it is possible to add to your family tree during the joy and mirth surrounding the Christmas tree or the Hanukkah bush.

In fact, it's a great idea to LEAD the joy and mirth with a little skillfully-masked genealogy.

Are you going to be around family members or long-time family friends this season? Use the opportunity to do a little folkloric research! All you need is a good recording app on your phone or tablet, or a recording program and a microphone attached to your laptop.


Recent experience combined with ancient undergraduate training have taught me a few things:

1. Get permission and agreement before you start recording.
2. Warn people a day or two ahead about subject matter so that their memories can start churning.
3. Refresh your recollection by examining your tree before the session. Decide on a focus.
4. Take some photos or family documents with you, and use them to refresh the recollections of your subjects.
5. Make sure everybody is comfortable before starting. Get the babies down for naps, fetch coffee or cocoa for participants, or get folks lickered-up - whatever works for your people. I'm not here to judge.
6. Keep some water, lozenges and tissues handy for dry throats and damp eyes.
7. Test with a short recording of yourself in the space you intend to use, with the equipment you intend to use. Make sure that everything works before your subjects are seated and ready.
8. If you can, have a back-up plan: take a phone *and* a tablet, a tablet *and* a laptop-plus-mic. Don't miss golden opportunities to being thwarted by technology.

9. Ask open-ended questions that demand more than a “yes” or “no.” Examples include “What’s your earliest memory about your parents?” or “Who’s the oldest ancestor you knew?” “Where was your family during World War II?” or “What do you remember about living in (town name)?”
10. Only participate in the story-telling process to prompt others – this isn’t about *your* memories, it’s about *their* memories. Ask questions to fill in blanks that you may notice, or say things like “I remember” or “didn’t she say...?” but otherwise, be the interviewer. It’s fun, but for you, this should be work.
11. Once people are in the flow (it may take a few minutes), take notes if you find yourself wanting to interject. Come back around to questions that go unanswered.
12. Encourage participants to take notes, too, so that they can return to stories and questions.
13. Manage your interviewees, politely but firmly.
14. Allow story-tellers to egg one another on, but keep to the intended thread of discussion.
15. Stop the process every two hours or so. Folks need a bathroom and a stroll from time to time.
16. BACK UP YOUR FILES TO THE CLOUD, GOOGLE DRIVE, WHEREVER ELSE THEY MAY BE SAFE. I recently lost 3 hours of my father’s memories because of a blip with my phone. Don’t let that happen to you!
17. Make CDs of the recordings, make them available via [Drop Box](#) or [ShareFile](#) another [file-sharing service](#). Remember that you are only ever the steward of this information; it belongs to *everyone* in your family.
18. Most important of all, have fun. This is the season of merriment. Even if the babies are screaming and people interrupt each other with conflicting accounts, let it roll. This is your family. Your descendants will enjoy the disarray and madness as much as they will the stories themselves.

If you do this, be sure to come back to the blog and post how it went!

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