“Folklore, or Just the Facts, Ma’am” is for EVERYBODY. If you’re doing research for yourself, or helping someone new start their own, this episode will help you to understand the whys and hows of using folklore-gathering skills to jumpstart your tree. I discuss a few examples of how folklore has helped me, and how asking the right questions in the right way will warm up any participant in a story-gathering session. Then, I give my ten-point plan for successful folklore gathering. AND – I announce my new Patreon account, where you can support the podcast and earn valuable rewards for as little as $1 per month!

Hello, and welcome to Episode 3 of From Paper To People, Ancestors Alive! Genealogy’s new podcast. I am your hostess with the mostest, Carolynn ni Lochlainn, and this week’s topic is Folklore, or Just the Facts, Ma’am

This episode is for EVERYBODY. If you’re doing your own family research and you’re just starting out, this is absolutely the episode for you. If you’ve been in the work a while but you don’t have much patience for folklore, hang in there. I’ll show you why it’s good stuff.

Let’s start with the basics. What is folklore? It is subjective storytelling from one point of view, though it can be a collective process. It does NOT involve evidence. It’s made up of two basic elements: questions asked by an interviewer, and the responsive answers that are given by THE INFORMANT, or person being interviewed. The questions themselves ARE important, and they ARE a part of the folklore itself, because the same questions can be asked in a variety of ways, and some versions of a given question will yield more information than other versions of that same question. That variety can give the interviewer a vision of the way that an informant thinks, or remembers, and the interviewer can shift gears to suit that informant’s specific needs.

Now, I know that folklore gets a bad rap in genealogical circles, but when you’re first starting

up your own tree, or you're working with someone new, folklore is a really good place to start. Most people don't have legal documents or family letters to establish family names and dates. Stories are a great way to begin. Can folklore be tall tales of things that people WISH had happened? Absolutely. It's littered with apocrypha. But there are always kernels of truth in a story, no matter how wild the story, and the stories you collect will provide the bones on which you can later hang the meat of documentary research. And as I say that, I realize that I'm not sure whether that made me really hungry or really disgusted. Anyway…

An example from my family: for years, I was told that my great-great-uncle Charlie and his wife Fannie died on the same day. He was killed in an oil well explosion in Desdemona, Texas, and she was so disheartened that she went home and committed suicide. They were Catholic, but because she committed a mortal sin, she was buried on the outside of the church cemetery and he on the inside, just across the wall from one another. It's very romantic, in /a creepy way.

I was able to put them both on my tree and find evidence of his life via census and other family group documentation, but nothing of hers and no proof of the story of their deaths was available. The first thing I found that disproved some of the lore was their shared headstone on Findagrave. They were buried in a municipal cemetery together in 1923, next to his mother and siblings, so the whole Catholic sin aspect of the story was off. I have his rosary, so I know that he WAS Catholic, but the burial story was good old-fashioned Texas bloviation.

Next, I searched. For years. I went to websites about explosions in history, I looked in Texas history, I called the Texas State Archives, and I couldn't find a thing about an explosion in Desdemona in 1923. I was beginning to doubt the whole story when, based on their shared death date, I searched Newspapers.com for his name and a possible obituary. 35 years after the search began, I found the actual story in a Fort Worth paper: Charlie WAS injured and killed, in an oil well explosion, but in Bristow OK. Fannie DID kill herself – in grief, she walked home from the hospital, grabbed a pistol, and shot herself about an hour after Uncle Charlie's death. The folklore led me to the facts, and these facts led me to their death certificates,

which showed that my great-grandfather signed for their bodies and had them sent to the municipal ground in West Virginia for burial in the family plot. The moral of this story? The folklore was a jumping-off point that allowed for further research, and eventually, the facts (including her maiden name) came out.

So, folklore works. Now, we need good methodology. Here's an example from yesterday's project: I was talking to a friend who is also a new reparational client. We were just getting started, he had done no research with his family yet AT ALL, and we were talking about his grandparents. I asked him "when did your grandfather die?" and he replied "I'm not sure." So, I went at it from a different angle: I asked "was he alive during your lifetime? Did you know him?" and he replied "yes." This gave me room to try another approach: I asked "how old were you when your grandfather died?" because we usually do have some frame of reference for this sort of thing – we can remember where we were in school, or associate a hit record of the year, or something like that that can help us find a date or date range for an event. He recalled his own age at the time of Grandpa's death, we did the math, and we arrived at an approximate date of death for his grandfather. That was a really good start. Spontaneously, he said "I know he was 78 when he died." That gave me a rough birth year. I just had to pull out a calculator, because I stink at math. I subtracted Grandpa's death age from his death year, and I had his birth year. Remember, all of this is approximate. With folklore, nothing is set in stone. But it's a great starting point.

Then, the magic kicked in, and this is really important – having recalled a few things successfully, and having seen that his memory was better than he thought, my friend began to recall more easily, and without any prompting – what state Grandpa had been born in, even a story about why he traveled from one state to another in his early adulthood. Now, we had an approximate birthdate, birthplace, death date and death place for Grandpa. That's a lot in just a few minutes. And, most of all, my friend warmed up and remembered more fluently as we went. He started the session uncertain about the whole process, and ended it excited because he saw that he knew more than he thought. We went through this for both of his parents and all of his grandparents. And voila, a tree was born.

So you can see why folklore is important in genealogy. It's not about absolute facts, it's about a starting place. Asking questions in a specific way, can elicit bits of truth about where and when people lived, what their names were, how many kids they had, the kinds of business they engaged in, where they worshipped, how they voted in elections, all sorts of things that help to build a tree to the point that we can start seeking verifiable documentation.

With that in mind, we can break the uses of folklore into two – one that looks for facts, and one that celebrates family stories. This week, I'm discussing the first kind of folklore – the kind that lets an interviewer locate names, dates and places of the major events of life that are required in genealogy – Birth, Marriage, Divorce and Death, or the BMDDs.

Regardless of what you're seeking, the methodology is the same. It's based in preparation, gentleness, and love. It's not a deposition. It's a conversation in which the interviewer asks open-ended questions that allow for the informant to really talk. It's also far more about the informant than it is the interviewer. Your role as interviewer is not to answer the questions for or with your informant, but to ask and sit quietly as the informant accesses his or her memories and fills the space. Think about Ellen DeGeneres, or Oprah – they are GREAT interviewers because they ask a question and then sit back, creating a space for their informants to fill. It's astonishing. Then, think about somebody like Chris Mathews, who just. can't . shut. Up. Don't be Chris Mathews. Lead with your inner Oprah.

And if one way of asking a question doesn't work, reframe the question. If you share memories of a person with your informant, use that knowledge to lovingly and gently prompt your informant. "Didn't you once tell me that your dad used to blah blah blah…" is a great way to open up your informant. Here are my ten points of prep for successful folklore gathering.

1. Choose your informants by age: interview the oldest folks first. It sounds callous, but you want the oldest memories first, before they are lost to you altogether. My uncle had the foresight to interview the most senior elders in our family on tape back in the 1970s, and

I am forever grateful for that. By the way, we'll discuss some shocking revelations about small-town Texas in my great-grandmother's time next week, and you'll see exactly what I mean. She was born in 1898. It's some surprisingly scandalous stuff.

2. Prepare your informant, because there's an element of psychology involved in interviewing anybody – tell your informant what you're doing – Hey, mom, I'm building a family tree. Ask permission to interview her. Show respect for her time schedule. Set up a time and place for the interview, whether it's by phone or Skype or Messenger video chat or Google Hang or in person, where and when your informant will be relaxed. If your informant sundowns, or loses memory as the day turns to evening, schedule accordingly. Ask her to shut off the phone ringer. Make sure she has her favorite tea, a nice mochachino, or a coupla shots of vodka – whatever chills her out. You want her relaxed, fed, watered, and above all, to have peed. You may think I'm joking, but I'm not – it's like the family road trip. Everybody needs to pee first, you included.
3. Prepare yourself – Think about your goals. You want names and BMDDs – birth, marriage, divorce, and death – dates and places. Women always go by their MAIDEN names in genealogy because, fellas, we existed before we married you. You can't find Mom's birth certificate using her married name because she wasn't married at birth, right? Stay focused on your objective – complete info to the best of your informant's ability. Also, remember that there are a lot of ways to get answers. For argument's sake, let's say that you're interviewing your dad. You want your grandmother's deets. You ask:
    1. "What is your mom's birthdate?" A direct question like that can move you to the next item if Dad knows the answer. But, if he doesn't, it's the hardest type of question to answer, particularly early in the interview. Dad hasn't yet proven to himself that he is actually good at remembering things on demand. It's a slightly tense process for even the most willing informant, because a direct question is stand-and-deliver kind of thing. So, start with the hardest form of the question in case he can answer it, and then work your way around to the easier ways so he knows where you're headed. It will give Dad confidence to reach the answer.
    2. Another way of asking Dad that question: About when was your mother born? What season, roughly what year? These are versions of the question that feel softer and

may better serve to prompt memories. Using qualifying terminology like “about” and “roughly” make the question FEEL easier. There is deep psychology in this.

3. You can also go at it from your dad’s birthdate: You ask: How old was your mother when you were born? Then, do the math. If Dad was born in 1950, and his mother was 20 when she gave birth, that means that Grandma was born in 1930 – the miracle of mathematics. And if you’re hopeless like me, have a calculator handy.

Note that all of these questions get you to the same place – Grandma’s birthdate.

1. Make a list of questions to ask, and leave space under each one to make notes. Your questions should be open-ended – they require a narrative, not a yes or no. You want a conversation, not a grilling at headquarters.
2. Follow a logical process when asking questions: What was grandma’s name? Did she have any siblings? What were their names? Who was older and who was younger? ALL of these questions together help you to build a generation within a tree, a starting place that will lead you to all of the documents on Ancestry and FamilySearch that will refine the facts in your tree.
3. Start with what you know – yourself – and go backwards generation by generation into what you don’t know. Ask Dad about Mom’s family, and vice-versa – they may well know things about one another’s people that you didn’t expect.
4. Get a good recording app on your phone and record every interview. Use a communications method like Skype that will automatically record the interview. Make sure you have cloud memory or a backup drive to store copies of the interviews. I lost 3 hours of incredible interview time with my dad, and now I have to do it over, all because the recording app I used was sub-par. Don’t make my mistake.
5. Before you actually interview, test your technology. Don’t waste your informant’s time with 15 minutes of connectivity problems and that sort of nonsense. This is a work of love and RESPECT.
6. Be on time. Your elders will appreciate that you not only respect their stories, but that you respect THEM. A happy informant now makes a willing informant next week.

7. Know that your informant may not be thrilled with answering all the questions that you have prepared at once, or at all. Pay attention, and if your informant is tiring, stop at a logical place and schedule another session. If your informant is edgy about discussing a particular member of the family, move on the the next topic. Your goal is to help your informants to become interested in the work, to enjoy your sessions, and to open up more in the future rather than shut down after one interview and never talk to you again.

Remember that I said that it can be a collective process? Another way of gathering folklore is to get multiple elders into a room, or get folks onto a group call or Skype. I don't recommend this as a first step, because it can get kind of hectic, like herding cats, but by the same token, that's exactly what you're going for. If you choose to do this, follow the same procedures I've outlined, and let everybody answer the questions WHILE YOU GUIDE PEOPLE TO STAY ON TOPIC. In the classic Japanese film "Rashomon," three different people recount their memory of a traumatic event that they witnessed together. Each has his own version of the event. Between all of the recounted versions, the truth of the incident comes out. Much like in Rashomon, putting family informants together not only gives a more complete view of what really happened and who folks really were, it allows participants to warm up to one another, tell more stories, and have more fun doing it.

Ultimately, I want you to celebrate your family in your work. This approach to gathering lore actually strengthens family bonds and understanding between generations. It is fun, it is fascinating, and it works.

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