

We're talking folklore again (a vital part of genealogy to this genealogist) but this time about the hardest gathering challenge of all: you vs. a room full of your family or friends at holiday celebrations. I'll tell you about my first folklore gathering assignment at age 18, which was me vs. an Irish folk band called [Dolores Keane](#) and Reel Union. I was recovering from mononucleosis, and they plied me with Guinness until I couldn't see straight. Suffice it to say that you can learn from my mistakes. Then, I'll recommend [Nancy Candea](#) and [Yoga Impact 501c3](#) – specifically, her video at [goo.gl/oq3z3c](https://goo.gl/oq3z3c), a short and simple pranayama breathing video that I use to relax when I am tense. It's a great preparation for going into a potentially difficult situation, and gathering group folklore is definitely potentially difficult. I'll discuss other preparations you'll need to make for yourself, things you'll want to account for in the group, and things you'll need to let go of because hey, we can't control everything! ALSO, joining my Patreon now means GETTING SWAG!!!! Want a New Year's present delivered to your door? Join by December 15th at \$15/month and You. Shall. Receive.



Hello and welcome to the long-awaited Episode 31 of From Paper To People, Ancestors Alive! Genealogy's wide-ranging podcast for the broadminded student. I am your hostess with the mostest, Carolynn ni Lochlainn. Yes, this is a teaching episode, though not a deep cut, I admit. The drugs are kicking in and I am feeling better, so we're going to extend prior discussions of gathering folklore to encompass the idea of getting a roomful of people to contribute to a conversation that you record without any blood being drawn. Could be a lot of fun; could be like herding cats. The quality of the experience is up to you. We'll talk about it.

First, I wanted to let you know: right now, my blog posts are purely podcast episodes with very short introductions to the subject matter. Over the next few weeks, I will be making the full text of each episode's script available to you as a pages on the website. And they'll be copyrighted and registered so that, if you tried to make off with my intellectual property, I can legally cross the Earth in search of you and lasso your butt. So, there's that. Some

episodes will have to be transcribed, so they won't all be up at once. But I hope this service benefits you.

Now, down to business: Some folks asked me this summer about gathering folklore at family holiday events, but honestly, I thought I'd covered it pretty well in Episodes 3 and 4. Upon reflection, though, I find I have a few notes to add. If you are celebrating Thanksgiving with a group of friends or family and you want to record stories, I think that Thanksgiving is a perfect time to do it. There are no presents to be opened and no holiday candy on which to gorge, so maybe the children in attendance will be screaming just a little bit less than at other holidays.

As an overview, I want to tell you a story about my first-ever foray into folklore gathering.

Have you listened to Episode 4, The Glory of the Story? If not, you should listen to Episode 3, "Just the Facts, Ma'am" first, then "The Glory of the Story" before heading to a holiday celebration where you intend to record lore. Episode 3 discusses the mechanics of planning and recording (equipment, time of day, preparing your informants and making them comfortable), and Episode 4 goes into collecting the kind of story that I think is better suited to holiday gatherings: subjective and potentially tall tales, but today we'll tailor that to focusing on those about the holidays themselves. You decide whether you're looking for facts or just chin-wagging, but if you're planning to be with a group of people, I'd just aim for stories, and fun while telling them. You might get some usable leads out of this for research, but at the holidays, I think it's more interesting to get recordings that you can commit to CD and the cloud to keep for future generations to hear. The value of an ancestor reaching out from the past and telling a story to a great-grandchild can't be overstated.

And if you're planning to be with friends, a good storytelling session has no less value. You can gain valuable experience as a folklorist working with friends, and the recording will be important to everyone present.

I know not everyone can or wishes to spend the holidays with others. For those who are planning to be solo, you can reach out to groups via Skype or Zoom and record using their built-in audio-video recording capacities. Those both auto-save to an mp3 file. I'd suggest looking into that RIGHT NOW if you're a newbie so you don't get caught out on the day. One of the keys to a successful session is being overly-prepared with the technology.

There are a few ideas about preparation that I haven't discussed yet, though, that I want to put in front of you now, particularly because I'm addressing the idea of approaching a group of people. Interviewing one-on-one is draining; taking on even 3 or 4 people can be downright exhausting. It can also be maddening. To do this successfully, you're going to have to be prepared within yourself as well as prepared in terms of questions, materials and tech, and ready to back up your recording as soon as it's done.

You need to visit the loo before you sit down with folks. That's obvious. But you also need to eat and drink (not caffeine, not sugar, but REAL food), and you need to prepare your mind and spirit so that you are calm, centered, and focused on the task at hand. No matter how much you love these folks, they just might stress you out. In fact, I'll bet you a cheeseburger they're gonna. You need to be at peace or this whole attempt at getting family or friends into a storytelling mode is going to go pear-shaped and cause the Great Thanksgiving Calamity of 2018. Pies will be thrown. The turkey will blow you all off and hitchhike to the next town with cranberries in his luggage.

My friend Nancy Candea at Yoga Impact 501c3 is truly an amazing practitioner and teacher. She's going to be on the podcast soon – she's assembling some breathing practices for all of us to use to de-stress when we're working at the library, the archives or freaking out at the computer when Ancestry throws down the 197th 404 error of the day. She's published a simple, beautiful video that I use, a pranayama breathing practice that kept me from getting too stressed in traffic today. You can find it on Facebook at [goo.gl/oq3z3c](https://goo.gl/oq3z3c). I recommend daily use anyway, but especially in times of critical freak-out or when you need to drop your heart rate so that you can remain calm and collected.

Then, make sure that your informants are comfy. You may need to loosen them up with a little glass of something, but not too much or it could get wild. Manage the room, but also manage your expectations. This is a balancing act. What you get is what you get. You can set the stage, but you can't control things past a certain point. Understanding that is a huge part of the work.

Remember what I said in episode 3: 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. They know when to play and when to be quiet. Listening attentively is the most important thing you can do to benefit your recording – most humans are naturally uncomfortable with silence in a conversational setting. If you ask a question and then go silent, someone else will feel obliged to fill that silence. And if you have a few people around and you've just asked "who in the family makes the best yams?", the conversation will definitely get moving without you. This takes a certain amount of self-control, flexibility, and emotional maturity, so if you're used to being the life of the party, you have to take off that party hat and find a way to put your folklorist hat on. This is not about you, Becky.

Also remember that things might start out slowly – people behave differently when they are being observed from how they behave when they're not – so expect things to creak a little at the beginning. Try variations on a question, or throw out a possible answer, one that you know someone will object to, in order to start conversation and maybe even a little low-level disagreement. People frequently start out thinking they don't know much, and then they warm up, remembering more fluently and with more opinion as they go. They may start the session uncertain about the whole process, but they will end it in laughter because they got into a good conversation with the group if you're managing the room.

If your relatives or friends get on your nerves (and whose don't, especially with a little drink or two taken), things might get a little confusing, and you might have to control your own annoyance. Someone else might even try to take control of the narrative, or the questioning. Know this going in – think about each person who will be present and make a realistic

assessment ahead of time: who's likely to cause a bit of trouble? Who's going to be quiet and more difficult to get involved? Who's going to tell a good story, and who might stray from the point? You're the ringmaster, so you'll need to have an empathetic attitude toward all of your participants and their various foibles and flaws.

Think ahead and be sure to recognize the uniqueness of each participant. The questions you ask should be designed to involve each person in a way that draws out that person about his or her special recollections.

As for the guts of the thing, episodes 3 and 4 will tell you what to do, but as a quick recap: ask open-ended questions, not questions that can be shut down with Yes or No. Be prepared with follow-up questions, even ones as simple as "why?" Be ready to take notes. You're looking for stories, remembrances, purely subjective data. You want fluid storytelling from your informant or informants, and if there are names and facts in the story, jot them down. **DON'T STOP THE FLOW** unless you really need to reroute. Folks are going to build on one another's contributions. Trust that good stories come from inspiration, and your plan may not be the plan that needs to play out, but it just may end up being better than you'd hoped. If you get confused about the players in a particular narrative, ask quick, clarifying questions like "where was that?" or "how did you know them?" The point of this kind of interview is to get as solid a narrative story or series of stories as you can. You can listen to the recording later on, **AFTER** you've backed it up to the cloud or an alternate drive, to nail down the names and dates for your tree. To the greatest degree possible, guide, but don't police. Stay out of the way.

Make it fun – this is a chance for you to include the family in genealogy without dragging them into the research that they don't care about. Oops, there I go, projecting my family onto yours! Because my family do not care at ALL about my work, but they love to tell stories about the people that they knew. If it's about someone within the last few generations, the stories will flow with the wine and beer, so I can actually get some information out of them and they can get some fun out of the situation. I call that a fair trade.

I hope that you do plan to record some family or friend folklore soon, and if you do, I hope you will write in and let me know how it goes. I will read your messages in a future podcast so that everyone can enjoy the stories. You can do that using the contact form at [ancestorsalivegenealogy.com](https://ancestorsalivegenealogy.com).

ALSO: I'm dumping Ko-fi because it did me no good and instead am instituting something new at my Patreon: If you join before December 15 for \$15 or more per month, I will send you a New Year's present. To your front door. Through the mail. Honest-to-goodness From Paper To People SWAG. And at all other levels, there will soon be SWAG incentives to join and support for a minimum of three months. Yep. SWAG. You heard it here first. Because the podcast's first anniversary is January 3rd, and you all rock my world. I want to thank you all for your listening support, but I also need your financial support. You know what I mean? I knew that you would.

Enjoy the holiday week, Americans, and to the rest of you, I hope you feel festive wherever you are. We'll have a Very Boston Thanksgiving from 1895 as our next Bonus Episode, and then on to some more lessons, some interviews, and Chanukkah and Christmas, because mama's medications are kicking IN!

Find all things FPPP at [ancestorsalivegenealogy.com](https://ancestorsalivegenealogy.com) – links to all previous episodes, all my social media incarnations, blah blah blah. Until next time, do your research, don't be a Jeffrey, capture some stories while you can, and above all, Expect Surprises!



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and a good mic and earphones (how about that Family Cookbook series??), you can contact me at <https://bit.ly/2Kxb6rm>.


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