

“The Glory of the Story” is about the fun of gathering family stories. Folklore is great for finding facts and hints to start a tree, but it’s equally wonderful for entertainment and for preserving the memory of family elders for all generations, current and future, to enjoy. If your family tells stories, this is for you. If they don’t but you like stories, this is for you. If you just want to hear one of MY family stories, this is for you. And above all, if you want to hear about a bit of felonious scandal from my family’s past, *this is for you*. I hope you enjoy the ep, and my new theme music too!



Hello, and welcome to Episode 4 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 part two of a discussion of Folklore. It’s about how much fun you can have by recording stories with your elders, no matter how far-fetched the stories may be. I’m calling this episode “The Glory of the Story.”

Before we get started, did you notice my hip new theme music? YEAH! I am so excited! My thanks to one of my oldest and dearest friends, Curt Brady, for creating that for me.

Now, last week’s discussion was a lot about process. It was a lot about facts. This week, I’m going to go less into the how-to’s and more into the sheer fun that comes from encouraging informants to tell their glorious stories.

Storytelling is almost a sport, part competition and part collaboration, in my family. Get my dad and my uncle in a room, and it’s “Katie bar the door,” as the ancestors said. They’re off to the races. One will recall, the next will add to it, and then the jokes get batted back and forth until the whole room is in tears and in pain from the laughter. Next thing you know, they’ll be singing doo-wop in two-part harmony like they did when they were kids. It’s fantastic. As the Irish say, it’s a rare bit of craic.

My great-uncle Gordon was absolutely full of it. You've heard of blarney, the Blarney Stone, the gift of the gab? His storytelling went one step farther – he came of Irish-Texans who were Irish-Pennsylvanians first. Every story got bigger and better with each telling. The twists and turns were more dramatic. The identification with famous people or famous events got stronger and stronger. My uncle, Gordon's nephew, was smart about this and he caught a bunch of Gordon's stories on cassette tape in the 1970s. My dad transferred the recorded sessions to CD, and now I can put them in FamilySearch.

Why is this important, if I, personally, never knew Gordon? We lost touch with his kids and grandkids because my family moved north and Gordon's moved east. But, through the magic of DNA and my obsession with documentary research, because I am oddly fearless (or nosy) about calling up complete strangers and saying "hey, I think we're cousins," I have found all of Gordon's living descendants. THEY never knew Gordon. He died of a heart attack relatively young. THEY'VE never heard his voice. My uncle and my dad have made it possible for Gordon's descendants to know him, blarney and all. I just have to edit the mp3 files down into sections, and then post those sections to FamilySearch. Because of my uncle's and my dad's forethought and care, the entire extended family can enjoy the recordings forever.

Imagine how that feels – you think your grandfather is lost to you, and then someone whom you never even knew existed shows up on your virtual doorstep and says "here, here's your grandfather." And that's how all family items should be – photos, recordings, facts, recollections. We are not OWNERS of these things. We are merely temporary custodians, caretakers of stories and images and facts, for all of our current relatives and for the generations yet to come. This is SO IMPORTANT to the work of genealogy and folklore. It is about spirit, laughter, love, sharing. I am VERY BIG on sharing data and resources, and I sincerely hope that you are too. Everyone deserves to have access to their ancestors.

Last week, we discussed hunting for specific facts, and while this week we're talking about pure storytelling, there's an important point to be made about storytelling and its incidental value in uncovering facts. One item from Gordon's memory, buried in layers of stuff, was the

fact that our ancestors, who came over from Ireland in 1830, came from Aghanloo Parish in County Derry, and that their home parish was called St. Aidan's. Gordon recounted this to my uncle about 140 years after the family came over, which is extraordinary. My uncle noted it on his handwritten tree, and my parents and I used that information as a guide when we went to Northern Ireland as a family back in 1982 because it was so specific. And it was right. We ended up standing in the ruins of the church where my 3rd great-aunt, Sarah McLaughlin, was baptized in 1829.

That same year, we went to NW Pennsylvania and stumbled upon my 3rd cousin 1x removed, a nun at the parish where the family settled upon arrival in the US. I asked her for help finding my 4th g-grandfather's grave marker, only for her to tell me that she, too, was a McLaughlin. My 3rd g-grandfather was brought over by two brothers, and together they brought over two more brothers and, eventually, their parents. The ties that we established in NW Pennsylvania in 1982 led to more people finding me, me finding more people, and more data sharing between the two family groups. Decades later, I proved the connection with DNA and the related lore of all of these distant cousins found through years. Their research and lore matched my family's research and lore about the town of Limavady, which is near St. Aidan's. So, yes, there is factual value in any folklore, as we discussed last week, but frequently, you only find it in hindsight. And that's OK. Because I want to discuss the joy of plain old storytelling without getting too hung up on facts. Those facts find their way into stories no matter what.

Personally, I have a memory like a sieve. I constantly conflate facts, I misremember, I forget the important stuff and I big up the little things. In other words, I am an Irish-American in her 50s. I have to rely on others to recall things correctly, or to recall them at all. So, I have started to record audio of MY elders, the same way that my uncle did with Gordon.

The method is simple: Set up to record audio or video, and test your technology beforehand. Ask permission, show up on time, get comfortable. If you want to revisit these specifics, I invite you to relisten to Episode 3, "Just the Facts, Ma'am." Ask open-ended questions about

locations and events, and be prepared to take notes, just as you would when seeking facts. But here, you are looking for stories and myths and tall tales. You want fluid storytelling from your informant or informants, and if there are names and facts in the story, note them down. **DON'T STOP THE FLOW.** At most, ask “and he was whose son?” or “whose wife was she?” to keep it straight for yourself. The point of this kind of interview is to get as solid a narrative 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, stay out of your informant’s way.

One great way to approach a session is to ask about holidays and religious celebrations: “What do you remember from your childhood Christmases?” “What were seders like in your parents’ house?” Guide your informant with names and facts that you know, or with bits of stories you’ve heard. Ask about what the family ate, who came by the house, that sort of thing. You want to get your informant to describe all of the texture of his time and life.

Another approach is about daily life. Start with questions like “What is your earliest memory?” “What was it like living in your hometown?” “Was your dad a good cook?” “What time did your parents get home from work?” “What sports and clubs were you involved with in school?” “What did you want to be when you grew up?” As your informant starts to talk, ask more questions that expand on the theme you’ve chosen. Find out what everyday living was like for your informant and the people constellated around her.

If you already know a few stories, indirectly ask your informant to talk about them. For instance, my dad and uncle lived in a small Texas town when they were young. My grandfather had died and my grandmother worked, so they spent a lot of their time together entertaining themselves. There are stories about going to the movies, about attempts to get them more involved at church, and all of the stories are absolutely hilarious. All I have to do is say “Tell me something about living in Pecos” and I am sure to get some great stories.

Last week I said I’d reveal the scandalous twists and turns of life in a small Texas town, and I

won't hold out on you any longer.

Joda Pauline Pace was my father's mother's mother. She was born in Texas in 1898. She used to tell us how she remembered stories of Pancho Villa's raids from her childhood. That seems like forever ago, but it was in her living memory, and she only died when I was 20.

I have one particular story that she and my grandmother, Agnes, used to tell. I want to share it with you because it illustrates the value of recording stories just as they are. This story, from and about Joda and Agnes, reveals not only who Joda was, but also how she thought about the world. And you can't hope for anything better from a family story. Without this story, I would be missing an important side of my great-grandmother's character.

First off, I always knew Joda to be sweet, kind, generous, funny, and adventurous. She was gregarious. She liked a highball and going out with the girls, playing cards and dancing. She wore fabulously awful costume jewelry. She talked like a hick but she was wicked smart about people. She divorced my great-grandfather because he was abusive and a drunk. She divorced her second husband because, apparently, he wasn't much better. Despite her variety of marital hardships, she REALLY LIKED being married so she tried again, outliving the third, who seemed to have been a nice guy (though I never met him) and the fourth, whom I knew from their marriage until his death. We called her last husband Opa, which is German for grandfather, because he was of German-Texan stock. By the time they met, Joda was living at a retirement center. She and her buddies use to take the center's van into San Antonio to go drinking on the Riverwalk. And if you know San Antonio at all, you know that it's full of joints for young people. That didn't stop Joda, though. Nothing did. And as soon as she saw Opa across the rec room at the center, she turned to the other ladies in her crew and said "don't touch him. He's mine." And so he was.

She also survived serious pneumonia and a broken back, and she outlived a daughter and a son-in-law by the time she was 70. She had a lot of siblings, and the Pace people were a very sociable crew who visited back and forth at one another's houses often. Joda never met a

stranger, just a new friend. She was always a real light in my life. I felt like I could say anything around her, and like we understood one another. But there was a slightly darker side to her mischief.

In the 1930s in West Texas, the Depression hit hard. My family had no money, everybody had to work, and everybody stuck together to make the most of things. Shortly before my grandfather McLaughlin died, Joda went to visit him and Agnes. My dad was a very little boy. Joda noted that Agnes was wearing an old dress. She asked Agnes “Doesn’t Jimmy buy you new dresses?” and I guess she wasn’t satisfied with the answer because she took herself and my grandmother off to a department store to get a new dress.

Joda and Agnes each picked out a new dress or two – I don’t know the specifics – and then they went to pay at the cashstand. Joda said that this one was on her, so she made out a check and they left. Back then, counter checks were literally COUNTER checks – there were blank checks sitting at the cashier’s counter, and you filled out your name, your bank’s name, your account number and the purchase amount. The department store and the bank did the rest.

What Joda didn’t tell the store or my grandma, for that matter, was that she had no money. So she made up a name and bank account number, filled out the check, and walked off with free dresses. According to Joda, some 20 years later a department store detective showed up at her apartment. By this time she’d remarried at least once and lived in Houston. The detective asked for Mrs. Whoever (the fake name that she’d written out on that check) and without missing a beat, Joda said “oh, she died.” Just like that. “She died.” The detective went away and, as she told it, Joda never heard about it again.

In other words, my great-grandmother the bon vivant was also a bit of a thief.

Now, is this story true? I would say MOSTLY. The part at the end about the detective seems a bit unlikely to me, but with Joda, you could never tell. She was larger than life. The most

important points in this story are these: Joda wanted the best of everything for Agnes. Joda lived big despite her poverty. And Joda was a scofflaw. Not only did she get away with the theft, she didn't care. We tend to idolize and idealize our ancestors. I never would have thought of Joda as an intentional law-breaker. This story serves to humanize her in my memory. And I will always be grateful for that.

So, I strongly urge you to record family lore not only for its factual hints, but also for the pure glory of the story. If you do this, it will draw you closer to your ancestors, enable you to provide future generations with the 3D personalities of living, breathing human beings that those generations will never meet, and it will create records and memories for cousins and other relatives upon whom you will stumble. They all will be grateful that you did this, and those you interview will be grateful and feel loved and valued too.

Thanks for listening, and my thanks again to Curt Brady for my hip new theme music. He plays in the Hampton, Virginia area. You can catch him playing new country with Nashville Nights, old-school jazz and standards with 504 Supreme, and blues with Kelly Curtis. And if you want him to create and record a theme for you, visit his website at cbradymusic.wixsite.com/cbrady or email him at curtisbrady@yahoo.com.

As for me, I'm around. You can find me online at ancestorsalivegenealogy.com, and on Facebook at [AncestorsAliveGenealogy](https://www.facebook.com/AncestorsAliveGenealogy).

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