

## **FAMILY FOLKLORE IN THE CLASSROOM**

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[Editors' Note: This article, compiled by *AnthroNotes* editor Ruth O. Selig, is based on the research and writing of staff that originally developed a Family Folklore Program for the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival, as well as additional materials collected in Laramie, Wyoming, for a teachers' in-service workshop taught by Selig and Laramie High School English teacher, Karen Maxfield. Many of the ideas are drawn from *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* by Steven J. Zeitlin, Amy J. Kotkin, and Holly Cutting Baker.

Recently the National Endowment for the Humanities, in partnership with the White House Millennium Council, undertook a "millennium" project called My History, an initiative that "offers all of us a way to explore family history as we discover how our own family stories connect to the history of our nation." The NEH guidebook, *My History is America's History: 15 Things You Can Do to Save America's Stories*, offers specific ways to preserve family memories and treasures through activities that make history an exciting adventure.]

### **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists have begun to focus attention on community studies, teaching us much about the varied traditions flourishing in America. Within our country we must look to the experiences of ethnic and religious groups, the lives of women and children, the history of regional and occupational groups, and even to our own family folklore to find the creative and cultural expression of the American past. "For every famous literary and photographic work, there are hundreds of thousands of stories and snapshots in which Americans have invested a large portion of their creative genius. Family tradition is one of the great repositories of American culture. It contains clues to our national character and insights into our family structure" (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker, p.2).

Family folklore, then, consists of family stories, expressions, customs, traditions, and photographs that characterize a family's life. Having students collect, record, and write about their family folklore can be an exciting and meaningful way for them to connect themselves to broader American culture and history, as well as help them sharpen their skills in social studies and language arts.

### **How To Begin**

Since family folklore consists of traditions, stories, artifacts, and photographs, each of the approaches described below can be the focus of class projects.

#### Holiday Analysis:

Explain to students that a family tradition is a special practice that a family reenacts in approximately the same way, day after day or year after year. A birthday celebration, Passover Seder, or Thanksgiving dinner may give rise to family traditions as may other holidays such as the Fourth of July or Labor Day.

On a chart, have students make a vertical list of all the holidays they or their families celebrate, and briefly describe in horizontal categories what traditions are associated with each. For example, students can list what foods are eaten, when and where the holiday meal is served, and who usually attends. What games, if any, are played? Are certain objects or dishes always present? Are gifts exchanged, and if so how, when, and where? Are songs sung, music played, dances danced, prayers offered, or speeches given? Is the national flag displayed? Is religious service attended?

After compiling their individual charts, students should be ready to discuss the origin of holidays and the various ways each is celebrated. It should become readily apparent that holidays originate for a variety of reasons, but that while students share some traditions with one another, other traditions are unique to each person's family. Some of this interesting variation arises from regional, ethnic, and religious background, but some of this variation also arises from family and community history. As students share their common and different experiences, a rich blending of family and cultural history should emerge, along with new understanding that both the yearly cycle and our personal lives are marked by continuing celebrations and rituals.

#### Interviewing Family Members:

The next project might be the recording of a student's own family history through information gained by interviewing another family member. Every interview will be different, and students should be encouraged to create their own questions. The "Interviewing Guide and Questionnaire" offered at the end of this article should be useful in helping students conduct successful interviews.

#### Family Stories:

Once students have conducted interviews they will be in a good position to share and analyze their family folklore. Researchers have detailed certain recurrent themes in family folklore stories such as the "crossing over" stories recounting the migration west in covered wagons, crossing borders from one county to another, or remembering the ocean voyages ending at Ellis Island; stories of family heroes, rogues, or misfits; stories of parents' youthful antics or courtship and marriage; or stories of family misfortunes, feuds, or escape from near death. Ask students to share their stories and see if they can identify any of these or other common themes.

#### Planning a Family Folklore Unit:

After students have done a holiday analysis, interviewed older family members, and collected family folklore stories, a number of class projects and units are possible. Students can make a collection of photographs, objects, and recipes handed down in their families. The class may want to make an illustrated collection of particularly amusing or dramatic family stories. Photo albums can be shared, and photo-journals or scrapbooks can be created combining stories, reminiscences, family expressions, family photos, genealogy charts, and personal and family time lines marking and illustrating important family events and changes.

Through these and other projects described in the attached list, students should gain an appreciation of tradition and continuity from one generation to the next, and the value of preserving traditions, objects, and ideas from the past. Through family folklore a teacher can bring history to life and life to history, as well as help students connect their personal and family past to broader cultural and language arts study.

### **Family Folklore Projects**

#### Classroom Exhibits:

Students can build classroom exhibits using posters, photographs, artifacts, and stories drawn from their own family folklore to illustrate topics such as "Western Expansion," "Immigration," "Victorian Era," "Jazz Age," or "The Depression."

#### Scrapbooks or Photojournals:

Scrapbooks or photojournals can be organized in a variety of ways using family trees, genealogical charts, photographs, family stories, jokes, expressions, games, nicknames, songs, etc. Much of what students learn through interviewing older family members can be included. Some students may choose to focus this project more on their own personal history if they cannot gather enough material on their larger families.

#### Heirlooms:

Have students find out what objects they have which are family keepsakes or heirlooms. Have them find out the history of these objects and the stories behind these family treasures. Students can then write descriptions or imaginary stories about these important and symbolic objects. How do the heirlooms connect past, present, and future? What do they reflect of the family and the larger culture? Students can make a "Class Collection" of objects which could become heirlooms for a future generation.

#### Crafts:

In many families hand skills are carried down through the generations. Students can try to learn a handicraft from an older member of their family or research an earlier method of production from a specific period they choose. Once the research is completed, students should try to replicate the method as closely as possible for such crafts as candle dipping, soap making, hide tanning, quilting, basket weaving, ham curing, vegetable canning, and jelly or bread making.

#### Calendars:

Students can make a family food calendar by interviewing parents or grandparents about their family food traditions and recipes, particularly favorite foods, traditional holiday foods, and birthday foods. Each student can then make a food calendar with a family recipe and drawing illustrating each month. On the calendar all the holidays of the year can be marked as well as any family birthdays and anniversaries.

#### Home Remedies:

Ask students to research how their parents and grandparents cared for a) hiccups, b) a cold or the flu, c) warts, and d) indigestion. Then students can share their "cures" in a class discussion focusing on "family folk medicine."

#### Names:

Students can collect information about their first, middle, and last names, as well as any family nicknames. In class discussion it should become clear that names originate in a variety of ways and that names often reflect complex family tradition, origins, and even naming fashion trends. Students can research naming ceremonies and customs from a variety of religious traditions and cultures. Finally, each student can create a personal Coat of Arms, Shield, or Name Crest illustrated with pictures symbolizing activities, values, or traditions important to their families.

### Class Banquet:

Students bring in a variety of favorite family recipes, and together the class plans and prepares a "feast" made up of family foods and other traditional meal customs. Students who cannot contribute food can often contribute these customs, a prayer or recitation before the meal, or a game or song to come just after the banquet.

### Guest Speakers:

Invite interested parents or grand-parents to the classroom to share their particular food or holiday customs, family stories, photo albums, or handicrafts. Invite a religious leader to discuss ceremonies and rituals which mark important "rites of passage" such as birth, marriage, and death.

### Time Lines:

Ask students to make an illustrated time line of important moments in their own lives: birth, birthdays, first school, pets, hobbies, travels, new skills, etc. Then ask them to make an illustrated time line of their family's history beginning with the birth date of the oldest member of the family. The line should include important births, marriages, and deaths, but also significant events such as migrations or moves, occupational changes, educational achievements, travels, etc. Family photographs or drawings can be used for illustrations.

### Local Historical Society:

Visit your local museum or historical society and have students identify connections they can see between their own family history and the history of their community as reflected in the exhibits.

### Imaginary Family Folklore:

Divide the class into groups, each one responsible for creating an imaginary family folklore. Each group must 1) create an "ancestor" and a story of migration to America; 2) have a family story of a hero or rogue; 3) describe an heirloom; 4) create an unusual holiday tradition. Groups then share their "folklore."

## **Family Folklore to Teach Writing**

1. Many descriptive and narrative writing assignments easily grow from a study of family folklore.

For example, students can describe:

- a) a childhood memory, a holiday meal, a family heirloom;
- b) a scene or person in an old family photograph;
- c) the family history imagined for a person in a photograph book;
- d) an amusing family story elaborated and illustrated;
- e) a short autobiography or family history illustrated with drawings or family photographs.

2. History and research paper assignments might include:

- a) relating family history to broader political, social, or economic events by asking students to incorporate interview material into papers on such topics as the depression, women's roles in the 1950s, World War II, and the beginning of the space age;
- b) a research paper based on events during the week the student was born;
- c) a study of the 20th century, decade by decade, using old magazines and newspapers, along with family histories.

3. For any novel or short story your class is reading, students can imagine, create, and write the family folklore of a particular character.

4. Writing Proverbs:

- a) Students can write and illustrate a story explaining the proverb: "If you want to know the apple, you've got to study the tree."
- b) Students can read books of proverbs to choose two or three that relate to family folklore and then use them as a basis for a story and illustration.
- c) Finally, students can try to write their own family folklore proverb.

For most of the activities and projects described in this Teacher's Corner, it is useful to have students conduct family interviews. Below is a guide adapted, with permission from the authors, from *A Family Folklore Interviewing Guide and Questionnaire* by Holly Cutting Baker, Amy Kotkin, and Margaret Yocom, 1978.

### **Interviewing Guide**

A word of Warning:

Because family folklore exists only within the context of a living family, it is constantly evolving. Each generation will forget or alter the lore that it has received, but that same generation will add new verbal lore and new traditions. A tradition does not have to be old to be worth recording. Collecting family folklore is one case in which too much is better than too little. Tapes can be edited and transcripts can be discarded, but the tradition, story, or expression that you neglect to record today may exist only in memory next week. No one can record all of a family's folklore.

Equipment:

Note-taking and tape recording are the usual means of recording family folklore. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. When a choice is possible, you should use whichever will work best for your interview.

Note-taking can be distracting and make it difficult to participate in the conversation or activities involved with the interview. Also, the expressions of the voice of the informant are lost. A tape recorder may at first make the participants uneasy but they will soon become accustomed to its presence. A small cassette machine with a built-in, omni-directional microphone will give the best results. A ninety-minute cassette is a good choice since it will record substantial segments of an interview without interruption. The microphone should be placed so that all voices, including yours, can be picked up. Run a test before you begin the actual interview and adjust the machine accordingly. As far as possible, all extraneous noise should be eliminated.

Although not as essential as a tape recorder, a camera is a useful piece of equipment. Besides providing a visual record of the participants, it can also be used to copy any documentary records that your informant might offer such as photographs or scrapbooks.

People to Interview:

Start with yourself. You will know a great deal about your family history. Questions you come up with will give you guidelines for how to interview other people.

The first outside person you interview should be someone with whom you feel very comfortable. A parent or sibling is a good choice. Don't neglect non-relatives. Your grandfather's best friend

might tell you things about him no family member knows. Each interview will give you clues about whom you might interview next.

#### Place:

A spontaneous, natural context is the best to bring about the flow of memories--family dinners, talking with grandma while doing the dishes or cleaning out closets. If possible, plan to hold your interview while doing a familiar kind of activity like walking, baking, or visiting -- anything that might naturally bring up memories. You might use an heirloom or photographs to help move the interview along.

#### Ethics:

Because of the personal nature of folklore, students must be careful to protect the privacy and rights of all family members. Before initiating a unit in family folklore, it is a good idea to explain the class project to your students' families. Assure all involved that students will interview only willing family members. Explain the purpose of the unit; for example, that the class is studying family folklore as part of their study of American history and that students will learn about writing, analyzing, and reporting information gathered through research and interviews. Before any interview, students should explain to the person being interviewed the purpose of the research.

#### Planning an Interview:

Spontaneous interviews will have to be handled as they happen. However, if possible, students should plan their interviews. It is even possible to supply informants with questions ahead of time. Questions should be developed so that one follows another logically. A few well-prepared questions will work better than many poorly prepared ones.

#### 1. Well-prepared questions are:

- a. concise, to the point, and not ambiguous.
- b. free of emotionally charged words. Be as objective as possible; avoid asking a question to get a specific response.

#### 2. Helpful hints in formulating questions:

- a. to get at facts, ask what? when? who?
- b. to get at ideas or descriptions of relationships, ask how? why?
- c. to get at analysis or critical thinking, use the words: please explain, can I have a reason for that, can you account for, what is the importance of, tell me why you agree or disagree, give illustrations for, how do you explain?
- d. to get an evaluation or provoke further thought, try asking: explain, show me, clarify, how would you evaluate?
- e. to get description, use the words: tell me, discuss, describe, illustrate, paint a word picture.

3. Realize there will be some information you will not be able to get. There may be sensitive material people do not want to discuss.

4. Be as low key as possible. Realize that you may be seen more as an interrogator than a son, daughter, or friend during the interview.

5. Show interest. Take an active part in the conversation without dominating it. Be a good listener.

6. Know what questions you want to ask, but don't be afraid to let your informant go off on a tangent. He or she may touch on important subjects you did not think to ask about.
7. Never turn off the tape recorder unless you are asked to. Not only does it break the conversation, such action suggests that you think some of your informant's material is not worth recording.
8. Use props whenever possible. Documents, letters, photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies, and other family heirlooms can be profitably used to stimulate memories.
9. Be sensitive to the needs of family members. Schedule your sessions at convenient times. Older people tire easily; cut the interview off at the first sign of fatigue. Don't slight family members who show interest in your project. Interview them even if you have reason to believe their material will be of minimal value.
10. If possible, prepare some kind of written report for the family members you interview as a tangible result of their participation. Remember to save all your tapes, notes, and other documentation that you accumulated. Label everything with names, dates, and places.

### **A Possible Questionnaire**

Every interview will be different, and students should be encouraged to formulate their own questions. Every family is unique, and every interviewer has his own interests and style. Thus no single set of questions will elicit all possible family folklore from all families. The most useful questions will be those developed through a person's own knowledge of his/her own family. However, the list below may be helpful and suggestive to students first embarking on family folklore interviewing.

#### Suggested Questions:

1. What do you know about your family's last name? Its origin? Its meaning? Did it change when your relatives first came to America? If it changed, what was it before and why was it changed? Are there any traditional first names, middle names, or nicknames in your family? How did they get started? When your parents married, did your mother keep her own last name? What does her last name mean? What is its history? How did your parents choose your name? What will you name your children?
2. What stories have come down to you about your grandparents or parents? For example, what do you know of their childhood, schooling, marriages, occupations, political activity, religious affiliation, hobbies? How many different occupations can you name from your family? Are there any special talents or hobbies which have come down in the family such as playing a musical instrument, needlework, painting?
3. How did your parents, grandparents, or other relatives come to meet and marry? Are there any family stories of lost loves, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, runaway lovers?
4. Ask some of your older relatives what they studied when they went to school. What did they dream of becoming when they grew up? What happened in their lives which made those dreams

possible or impossible to fulfill? Where have they traveled? What unusual people have they met in their lives? What are the most important things they've learned in their lives?

5. What other people (friends, household workers, children) have been adopted into your family? Are they called cousins, aunts, etc.?

6. What important holidays are celebrated in the family and how? What are the different ways family members have celebrated national, religious, or family holidays? What are the traditional meals, decorations, and ritual customs associated with these occasions? What innovations have entered your family's holiday celebrations? Has your family ever created an entirely new holiday?

7. Is there a family cemetery or burial plot? Who is buried with whom? Who makes burial place decisions? What kind of information is recorded on the gravestones or grave markers? [See "Exploring Historic Cemeteries by Ann Palkovich in the Winter 1998 issue of *AnthroNotes*.]

8. Are there any family stories about mysterious, eccentric, notorious, or infamous characters in the family? Any family heroes from the past? What stories have been handed down about these special people? Do you think the infamy or fame of the ancestor has grown through time?

9. Have any historical events affected your family? For example, how did the family survive the Depression? How have past wars affected the family?

10. Does your family have any heirlooms, paintings of famous ancestors, objects of sentimental or monetary value which have been handed down? Are there stories connected to them? Do you know their origin or line of passage through the generations? Are there special tools that have been handed down? Does anyone use them today?

11. Does your family have photo albums, scrapbooks, slides, home movies? Do you know all the family members in these pictures? What can you find out about relatives who died before you were born? Whose responsibility in the family is the upkeep of the diaries, albums, etc.? When are they shared or displayed? Are they specially arranged, edited, designed?

12. Does the family hold reunions? When, where, and how often? Who organizes the reunion, and who comes? What occurs during the reunion and is a record kept?

13. Does the family have any special recipes that have been preserved in the family from past generations? Are there any stories connected to them?

14. Does the family have any unique expressions, folk sayings, or home remedies that have been passed down through the generations?



### **Basic Family Folklore Resources**

Cook, Ann, Marilyn Gittell, and Herb Mark. 1976. *What Was it like When Your Grandparents Were Your Age?* Pantheon Books. (Text and numerous photographs depict life in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.)

Dixon, Janet T. and Dora Flack. 1977. *Preserving Your Past; a Painless Guide to Writing Your Autobiography and Family History*. Doubleday and Co. (A how-to-do-it family history book with suggestions for the creative writing aspects of doing family history.)

The National Endowment for the Humanities. 1999. *My History is America's History: 15 Things You Can Do to Save America's Stories*. In partnership with the White House Millennium Council. (The guidebook includes 15 activity chapters; for example, "Playing Detective with Photographs," "Discovering Clues in Family Papers," "Uncovering History in the Attic," as well as a large section on ways to preserve family treasures and an excellent Resources Section.) For further information, visit the website: [www.myhistory.org](http://www.myhistory.org).

Zeitlin, Steven J., Amy Kotkin, and Holly Cutting Baker. *A Celebration of American Family Folklore*. Pantheon Books, 1982.