

This year, pass the turkey and the family photos

By MELISSA RAYWORTH
Associated Press

When extended families lived closer together, it was easy to pass on family stories and anecdotes, maybe while cooking dinner or putting children to bed.

“Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go” was essentially how people lived, says John Baick, a history professor at Western New England University in Springfield, Massachusetts. Many Americans could walk or ride to relatives’ homes, and shared meals often. That created a natural place for passing on family history and re-telling the stories that help us understand where we come from.

In post-war America, says Baick, as families spread out to far-flung suburbs and beyond, gatherings with extended family became rarer. Now, holiday meals can be among the only opportunities to ask relatives about their lives and their recollections of previous generations.

This holiday season, along with planning menus and decorating, consider collecting family stories and bits of precious data that otherwise might be lost forever.

Start gently

Although a room full of relatives might seem the perfect place to gather stories, tread carefully, especially with older relatives, says Dr. Elisabeth Burgess, director of the Gerontology Institute at Georgia State University.

“Being in large groups of people, while exciting, can be overwhelming and can cause people to withdraw,” she says. Consider finding a quiet room to talk, or invite one or two older relatives to arrive before other guests.

“If Great Aunt Susie is coming over before the meal and she’s going to sit in the kitchen with you while you prepare the meal, that’s a great time to talk,” Burgess says. “Asking her about meals when she was growing up and holiday dinners she cooked while you are preparing your own meal may draw out stories that you’ve never heard before.”

Let older relatives know in advance that the rest of the family would be glad to hear their stories, she recommends: “Saying, ‘I don’t think the younger generation has heard your stories about World War II. Do you think we could make time to tell those stories?’”

Play detective

Ask family members to bring old photos, and reassure them that you’ll treat these fragile prints gently, says Heather Parker, associate dean in the School of Arts & Sciences at Saint Leo University,



This photo scanned by and provided by Heather R. Parker, Ph.D., shows one of her historical family photos. According to Parker, this is an example of looking at the indoor background of a place of business to get context clues about what her grandfather did for a living. They are in his barber shop. Pictured are Parker’s grandfather John Pitts, grandmother Isabelle Pitts and her mother Sharon Pitts. This photo was taken in the early 1950s.

Heather R. Parker via AP



This photo scanned by and provided by Heather R. Parker, Ph.D., shows her grandmother Isabelle on the left and Isabelle’s sister Ruth, right, in one of Parker’s historical family photographs. According to Parker, this photograph is an example of looking at the background of an outdoor photo and the informal nature of the photo to get context clues for family genealogy.

Heather R. Parker via AP



This photo scanned by and provided by Heather R. Parker, Ph.D., shows a photo of an unnamed man that she had found hidden in the frame behind her grandmother’s photo, and was a man to whom Parker’s grandmother had been engaged prior to marrying her grandfather.

Heather R. Parker via AP

in St. Leo, Florida.

If there isn’t a scanner where your gathering is happening, consider bringing a portable one. Relatives might be more willing to bring vintage photos if they

know they won’t be asked to leave them there. If a scanner isn’t possible, then use a good smartphone camera with plenty of memory, and take clear, well-lit digital photos of the vintage prints.

You may find that older relatives want to discuss the portraits and photos that are mainly of faces. But those images will only tell you so much. Examine photos with more context, like those taken in a public place, even if they’re not as attractively composed as the staged

portraits. Street scenes can offer nuggets of information about the location and date of photos, and about community history or historical context.

Have a magnifying glass handy, says Parker, to “look in the background of the picture, because that’s going to be where some of the story is

going to emerge.”

Ask about other people and events

It’s often hard to get elderly relatives to open up about themselves, Baick says. “If you can, get them talking about other things, other people.”

For example, he says: Ask your grandfather, “What was it like for Grandma to take care of Dad?” rather than asking him about himself. “That could lead to a dam bursting,” Baick says.

To help coax memories out, prepare some printed photos of historical events that occurred during your relatives’ lifetimes. If they discuss their impressions and experiences during those moments in history, personal details may emerge.

Music also works well toward that end. “With our phones, there’s no reason why we can’t identify the top songs of any era really fast,” Baick says. “What was it like to listen to the radio? What was it like to own an album?”

Also, ask relatives in advance to bring old correspondence to spark conversations.

“Often they have written letters and documentation,” Burgess says. “That’s another source of family history that we don’t think about, especially because we live in this email, texting world.”

Lastly, avoid “yes or no” questions or very broad, open-ended ones. Rather than “Did you like your childhood?” or “What was life like when you were young?,” start with something open but specific, like, “What toys do you remember having when you were a child?”

Family members interested in gathering stories can brainstorm ahead of time, Burgess says, to discuss “what are some of the things we’re interested in knowing about Great Uncle Bob’s childhood or Mom’s work life?”

Record respectfully

It’s important to record the stories and details that bubble up, but be respectful.

In any family, “sometimes things are going to come out that no one expected or no one is going to want to talk about,” Parker says. “You have to be prepared to understand how far you can push someone in the conversation.”

Relatives may feel more comfortable if they know what you’re planning to do with the memories and facts you gather. They also might find audio recording less intimidating than video.

And remember that earlier generations were raised in a generally more reticent, less confessional time, Parker notes: “They’re not as comfortable baring their souls as we are.”

Easy ways to stay healthy through holiday festivities

Albany Democrat-Herald

Between all those holiday festivities and extra seasonal chores, it can be difficult to always stay on top of your health. Here are some easy ways to prioritize wellness this time of year.

Make Mornings Count

Evenings are especially busy around this time of year, so taking control of your mornings can be key. But, on dark winter mornings, the hardest part about working out can sometimes be just getting out of bed. Stay accountable by making workout plans with friends. Get your yoga-loving coworker to commit to a weekly class with you, or start a holiday steps competition at work to motivate yourself to move more.

Try Out Tech

New, innovative technologies can inspire you to take charge of your health. Wearable fitness trackers have been around for a while, but home DNA tests, like Orig3n’s Fitness test, can help you optimize workouts by providing insights into your genes. Discover whether you have the genes that need an extra rest day, or whether you’re better at high-intensity workouts or endurance exercises. Then, adjust your routine accordingly. If you’re looking to eat more healthfully, the

Orig3n Nutrition test analyzes your hunger and weight genes so you can learn about how your body processes fats (good to know for Christmas cookie portion control) and if you’re predisposed to any food sensitivities. Ask for one for the holidays or gift a DNA test for your White Elephant swap.

Strike a Balance

Exercise accounts for only about 25 percent of weight loss, while healthy eating accounts for 75 percent. Indulge yourself this holiday season, but also make smart choices. Go for the apple pie and eggnog, but pair them with healthier choices earlier

in the day. Enjoy the shrimp cocktail instead of the cheese and crackers, or have a light breakfast of yogurt before the holiday feast. It’s all about balance. Instead of reaching for all the sweets and comfort foods in front of you, think about what you’d really like to eat. Choose wisely and mindfully.

Focus on Fun, Not Food

Don’t overthink it! It’s the holiday season and you’re supposed to be enjoying yourself. If you spend your time at parties counting calories instead of counting down to the New Year, you’ll miss out on the most important part of the season — time

spent with loved ones. What’s more, you may find yourself overindulging later if you’re too restrictive. Instead, focus on the people in your life and the memories you’re making.

Get Rest

The most wonderful time

of the year can be the most stressful when you have parties to plan, gifts to buy and financial obligations. A University of Chicago study found that people overeat on snacks — sometimes hundreds of additional

calories — when they aren’t getting enough sleep. Take a breather, and when you can, get yourself to bed early.

Start the new year right. Have fun this holiday season, without neglecting your health.

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