

Stories in Our Roots

Episode 4 • 33:01

(Edited for clarity)

SPEAKERS

Heather Murphy, Melissa Knapp

Stories in Our Roots 00:03

Welcome to the Stories in Our Roots podcast. I'm your host Heather Murphy. In this podcast, we dive deep into how knowing the stories of our ancestors can make a difference in our lives today.

Discovering our family history is more than a hobby. It is a way to connect deeply with ourselves, those we love and the world around us.

Heather Murphy 00:26

Hello, this is Heather Murphy and welcome to Episode Four of Stories in Our Roots. Today I talk with Melissa Knapp. And we had a great conversation and things came up that I hadn't actually thought about before. Some of the things we hit on were how our ancestors want to help us but we need to know who they are. That it's so much more meaningful if we know who these angels are that are helping us and we understand those family connections. She talked about why she is so glad that she didn't stick with her original plan of not worrying about learning her family's history until her kids were grown and she had more free time, because of the importance of the things that she's learning while she has her children at home. And then she also brought up a very good point, not only can we learn about our ancestors and learn from their experiences and be helped in that way, but as we learn about our ancestors, we can honor them and tell them, thank you, and build them up and show them gratitude for everything that they did for us.

Heather Murphy 01:40

Now, Melissa Knapp is a family historian. She's currently completing an undergraduate degree in family history research from Brigham Young University of Idaho, and she's also working towards a master's degree in Genealogy, Paleography and Heraldry from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. She loves to solve genealogical mysteries and to help others discover the fun and joy and family history. Her dream is to travel to Scotland and Ireland and explore those ancestral homelands. Melissa was born and raised in Mississippi, but currently lives in Utah with her husband and five children where Southern food, manners, stories and music are still a big part of her family's lives and heritage. Here is an interview with Melissa Knapp.

Heather Murphy 02:28

I am really pleased to be here with Melissa and I'm so excited that she's here to share her story with us. To get started, Melissa, could you just tell us a little bit about yourself?

Melissa Knapp 02:42

Hi, Heather, thank you so much for having me. My name is Melissa Knapp. I grew up in Mississippi and near the coast, southern Mississippi, near New Orleans. And I live in Utah now with my husband and five children but my heart is still in the South. It's still home to me, probably always will be. I went to college at the University of Southern Mississippi, way back then. One thing I've never actually, I don't think I've ever shared on my Instagram or blog is that I've actually been a freelance photographer for the last 10 years, but I keep trying to quit. I love it. I love photos, but as far as time, I'm just trying to cut back a little bit, but I do love, love taking pictures. And I've always loved photography, and I've always been captivated by old photos and things like that. And I grew up in a very musical family and the culture of the South, a lot of music and things. I used to teach KinderMusic actually, and I loved dancing growing up, so I still love dancing. I love the ocean. I miss that a lot. Hopefully one day I'll be closer to it. My dream is to one day travel to my family's homelands by the sea and be able to write about it. I love to write. So yeah, I'm the creator of Kindred Grove website. And I'm working on my degrees in family history research so that I can continue to share more. I love to be able to share the things that I've learned and how it's impacted my life.

Heather Murphy 04:24

Thank you. Now, can you tell us how you first started becoming interested in learning your family's history?

Melissa Knapp 04:33

Definitely. That's a good question. So I actually got into doing family history a little unintentionally. So I think... I mean, I always had an interest in family history. And in the back of my mind, I knew that it was something I would do someday, but I always thought it was going to be when my kids were grown. Because that's what you do, right? Like that's, that's... I always gave into that notion that there was a time and a season. And when your kids grew up, you did family history. So that was my plan. But I did do some little things like I interviewed my grandmother. I bought like little questionnaire books. And sometimes I would try to document her stories and my mother's and so I always had an interest in the stories. I always love those kind of things. And I, I always journaled a lot myself growing up and always loved writing. So I think that part was always with me, but I wasn't intentionally doing family history. And I did love, like I said, doing photography and documenting my own family and things like that. But as far as like researching my ancestors, I thought that that would come one day.

Melissa Knapp 05:40

So what happened was, it was about five or six years ago, and my oldest son was 15 at the time, and he just was like a perfectly healthy kid, super active and involved in lots of activities. Just the picture of health. And he got really sick. It just continued to get worse. And we didn't know why. And so for the next year, we were just in and out of doctors offices trying to figure out what was going on. No one could tell us. In the meantime, he just kept getting sicker. He couldn't eat anything. You know, he just was really tired and exhausted, and it was just really draining. I also, you know, my youngest was a baby at the time. So all of my kids had needs, you know, I also have a son with autism. And so you know, he's had a lot of his own special needs as well. So that was a really hard time that year just trying

to navigate through all of my family's various needs and trying to be there for everyone and take care of everything. And I think I was a little bit on autopilot, a little tired and exhausted and overwhelmed, because it had been a year and my son was getting sicker and we were really worried about him and we just didn't know what to do.

Melissa Knapp 06:57

I remember like it was yesterday, actually. There was this one night I was standing in front of the kitchen stove, cooking some bone broth, that was like what my son was living on at the time. That was about all he could eat. And I just had this thought about my great-grandpa. I never had met him. But I just thought about him and I just had this thought, like, I need to learn more about him. Because I realized, like, all that I ever knew about him was that he had been in World War I. And he had been gassed with mustard gas. And he spent the rest of his life, you know, plagued by coughing fits, and he actually died of lung cancer. I realized, like, that's all I knew about him. And so I just got to thinking about him.

Melissa Knapp 07:41

So I called my grandmother, and that was his daughter, and I said, "Mama Kay, I just got to thinking like, I don't know much about your father. And what can you tell me about him?" And so for the next half hour, she just told me things and I asked questions and I had like a little spiral notebook, I was writing everything down that she was telling me. And so after we got off the phone, I just felt so happy. Like, I just felt so elated. And I was so proud of myself. To be honest, I was thinking, you know, I'm so glad that I followed that inspiration to call and find out a little bit about him. I mean, she shared some things that I never knew. And I was just feeling so euphoric for about a minute.

Melissa Knapp 08:34

And then, this bad feeling came back again, like the same nagging feeling that I had been feeling before I called her half an hour before. And it was just eating at me and I just, it was such an unsettling feeling. And I think I even said out loud like, "I did what I was supposed to do. I followed the inspiration, what am I supposed to do? Why am I feeling this way?" And I heard this voice in my head say "It's not enough." And so I didn't know what that meant. But I was like, okay. So that night after I got kids to bed, I got out my laptop and sat in bed and I went on to FamilySearch and Ancestry for the first time. And I didn't know what I was doing at all. But I just knew that I was supposed to do something. And so I started trying to figure it out. I had never done any family history like that. So it was, you know, just a exploration at that at that point.

Melissa Knapp 09:34

But over the next week, I just was amazed. I started finding things and learning things. And as I started learning about my great grandpa, it was just really, really exciting. But I didn't see... I didn't necessarily feel like there was a connection there to what other things that were going on in my life. Until a few weeks later. I had a dream, actually, that my great-grandpa, he came to me in a dream. And I really believe now that the reason I felt that nagging sense to get to know him was because he had a message for me and I needed to know him. And in that dream, he came to me and he told me that he was watching out for my son. And that he wanted me to know that. And he also said that there was,

there was more that we needed to know about our son and his health. And then he was gone. That was it. He didn't tell me what it was. But it was one of those moments, one of those dreams that you have, and then you just wake up and I feel like that's just a blessing so that you can remember it.

Melissa Knapp 10:39

And so I knew that I needed, we need to do more. And I knew of another doctor that we hadn't seen. And so as soon as that doctor's office was open that morning, I called and I just said, "I need to get my son in. He's been having a lot of health issues. We've been to a lot of doctors but I'd like to bring him in." And so they made us appointment. And that actually ended up being the doctor that very quickly diagnosed my son. He had Lyme disease. And so that was a blessing. So me being able to learn about my family history... you know, we often talk about the healing blessings offamily history, and it's so true. But it actually had a very physical impact on my son's ability to... That was the doctor that we need to see. And I really feel like it pushed me to be able to find those answers. So that was a great blessing.

Melissa Knapp 11:33

And then, you know, our journey wasn't over then. Lyme disease is a very difficult disease to fight. And so my son was still really sick for a while and I mean, his skin was raw. I mean, he looked like a burn victim. We'd just have to wrap him up and taking care of him at that point was like a full-time job. And so family history really became my source of self-care. You know, like, I wasn't able to go out and have any retail therapy. I couldn't, I didn't have time, you know, my children needed me at home. But I could, you know, have a few minutes to get on the computer at night. And it was such a great escape for me. I could set my worries aside. I could set my... everything that was weighing on me, all of the stress of the day. And it was what was so healing for me to be able to just forget about my own problems for a few minutes. And I just noticed that I was sleeping better, I was feeling better. And then I started like discovering things about my ancestors that just gave me so much strength. I was like, wow, imagine had I not learned this while I still have children at home. Like, the things I was learning. I thought, oh my goodness, we should be learning this like from the time our kids are babies like this helps us raise our kids. And I just I really felt that power and I felt that strength as I as I learned about the things that they went through. I felt like these were such valuable tools that I needed, and I knew that that had been given to me as a gift and I was so glad that I was like, pushed into that.

Heather Murphy 13:03

I love that you say that because you chose to do it now it's blessed your life now and that you could have missed out on the blessings of knowing those ancestors had you thought is just for old people.

Melissa Knapp 13:16

That's right. Right. And it is so great. Like being able to share these stories with my children. You know, I've never forced it on them. Like I don't force them to get on the computer and research. But because it is something that I want to always be a positive experience for them. But I am always sharing the stories, I share the photos. Two of my daughters and I last night were playing around on like little photo filters on MyHeritage and it was just so fun. And we were having a great time with that, you know, just like doing the photo restoration things. And, you know, I just think there's such great ways to be able to implement it into your family and hopefully give your children at a young age foundation without having

to force that they have to research it. But I still hope that they will know enough and feel that spirit of family history so that one day they will have that desire to maybe like dig in and do more research.

Heather Murphy 14:15

On your website you told a story about going to it was your dad's house and going through boxes of things. And you told a story about how you got to this one box. Can you just pick up from there, this one box that you almost didn't go through?

Melissa Knapp 14:32

Yeah, so we had pulled everything out of the attic. My dad was going to be selling his house. So I knew this was my last chance to go and get any memorabilia. And when I started doing family history, I really didn't have any any family heirlooms, any family, any old family photos. And so my dad was like, "Yeah, you can come. There's a lot of stuff in the attic." So I was just going through boxes and finding the photos. That was just so great. There were also lots of boxes of old papers and bank statements and bills and just to-do list and things like that. And I, you know, I was trying to go through things as quickly as possible and get to the most important things. And there was this one big box. I started going through the top of it, and I mean, it just looked like papers and bills and, and I was like, "Okay, I'm not gonna go through this. This one's just too much. And it just, it probably just needed to be thrown away." And so I had it on the table, and I picked it up, and I walked it over to the corner of the dining room where I was working to just set it in to the pile of boxes that needed to be thrown away. And I just had this horrible feeling, like in this feeling inside of me like "No." And I was surprised by that. I was like, what, what in the world like, "Why do I feel that way?" And it just, I just had this gut-wrenching feeling. So I was like, oh, okay, well, I guess I should go through it.

Melissa Knapp 16:02

So I carried it back to the table and I just started going through it. It took me a while to go through that box. And piece by piece, I was just going through old papers that were completely insignificant. And as I got down to the very bottom, I was actually really, I was kind of angry with myself. Because I thought, "Why do I doubt myself?" you know, like, here I've gone through this box and there's nothing in it. Now I've wasted all this time. And but you know, it was almost to the bottom. So I was flipping through the papers, pulling them out, throwing them in the garbage, and I get to the very bottom and pick up the last envelope. And underneath it, there was like, it looked like a little note card. And I could see some handwriting on it. And I was like, oh, I thought it was like a little note. I was like, oh, wow, well, what is that? You know, I was excited to even see a note after just looking at old bank statements.

Melissa Knapp 17:00

And I picked it up and I turned it over. And well on the back of it it said "Dreamers and first load of lumber for the house." And I turned it over. And it was an old picture and it said 1918 of my great-grandparents on my dad's side. And they were sitting on the lumber that was used to build the house, the very house I was in because my dad was living in that house. And it was one of the most amazing moments. I... It was... It just like time just stood still in that moment. I just could not believe it. I was so grateful that I listened to myself. And I've tried not to beat myself up as much when I get those

feelings and I don't understand them. Because that was a miracle. I really was a family... It was a family miracle. We didn't have that photo.

Stories in Our Roots 17:58

Many people begin researching family history eager to discover their ancestors and explore their heritage. Oftentimes, they don't realize the mistakes that end up tangling their family tree until much later in their genealogy journey. That is why I put together a free guide, "7 Ways You (Unintentionally) Sabotage Your Family Tree." The link to download this guide is in the show notes. Are you letting what you don't know get in the way of discovering your family's story?

Heather Murphy 18:28

Do you have any thoughts of why it was so important that you put all that effort to find in that one photo?

Melissa Knapp 18:36

I think it was a gift because that really was... This was a new season in our family as my dad was leaving the home and that was hard for all of us. But he, you know, was way out in the country. And we knew he needed to be near family. And so it was the right thing. It was the right time for him to leave that home but it was hard. Hard for us to leave where... I mean that is the house that I, even though I never lived there, I really do kind of consider it like my childhood home because I moved around a lot. And so I didn't have like one stable home my whole life. But that was the place we always went home to. That's where we went fishing. And that's where I had so many great memories. And of taking locusts off the trees and riding the four wheelers out there. And so some of my best childhood memories were made at that home. And, you know, the farm there and knowing that we were leaving was hard enough. And so to be able to find that photo, I felt like was such a gift, but it also just reminded me that nothing is forgotten. I have a lot of faith and I believe in God and I just really believe that he's in the details.

Melissa Knapp 19:46

And one of the things I love about family history is that when we have these experiences, if we're willing, they can truly help us to realize like how that also translate to other areas of our life. That really made me think wow, if after all of these years that God has remembered that that little photo was buried in the bottom of this box, you know, what other details in my life is He working on, is He arranging that one day are gonna line up and that everything will come into play at the right time. And so that was a very powerful lesson to me. And it makes me think that a lot about family history. In fact, I've had so many tender mercies in so many little moments like that. And I think that's why it can become so addicting because it's you just get such a great feeling when you're doing it and you notice these things. But I've had this thought many times like wow, like, if God really orchestrated for this, for this to happen, or me to find this resource for someone who is no longer on this earth, you know, if that was so important to Him that like and I know like the way things lined up, everything worked out just right. Then it really has given me a lot of faith that wow, like I... He's working on things in my life too even things I can't see, things that don't make sense. But I can have faith that it's going to come together.

Heather Murphy 21:15

Thanks. That is really a beautiful thing that such a little photo, something that doesn't seem of much consequence, but yeah, it was important to your, for your family to have that. And then in a way it kind of brought everything full circle, as you're preparing to leave you see the moment when the house started.

Melissa Knapp 21:33

Yes, it really was. And it's still one of my one of my favorites. It was very, very much a blessing.

Heather Murphy 21:43

Are there any other particular ancestors, maybe one or two, that you feel really drawn to their story that has helped you?

Melissa Knapp 21:53

Yeah, definitely. Another one of my great-grandmother's actually on my dad's side. So she lived to be 101. I actually, I actually did know her. She died when I was nine. I always just felt a real kinship to her. I don't even know that it was necessarily the time I spent with her. But I don't know, it was just this connection I could always feel. And so as I got older and learned more about her, found out like when she... So she had several babies die. She just went through some really, really hard things. And then when she was in her 80s, she was at a doctor's appointment, and they told her that she had RH negative blood and the doctor explained to her that that is why her babies died. And she said, she just always wondered what had happened. Why? Why did her babies keep dying? Like she just, she just didn't understand how that could be. I'm sure she probably wondered, was she doing everything right, or she was healthy enough? I don't know. But I don't know exactly what went through her mind. But she did tell my mother just how difficult that that was not knowing those answers.

Melissa Knapp 22:59

But why that really, really impacted me is because then when I started having children, I found out that I too had RH negative blood. In fact, I was the only one out of all my siblings to get it. You know, I just thought about her, like, the time that she lived, what she went through and had I been born at a different time, my, my fate would have been the same as hers. And so I'm just in awe, you know, at her strength and just so grateful that my children were able to live, but my heart goes out to her because I just can't imagine losing, you know, so many children like that.

Melissa Knapp 23:33

Another one, kind of going back to my great-grandpa, and my original great-grandpa, the one that got me into it. I always, like I felt really connected to him too. Of course, I feel like he's my guardian angel. But it's been amazing because I've learned so much about him as I've gone through this journey for the last several years and I've been able to add to his memories and get a lot of memories from my grandmother. But it's really neat because I've seen a lot of parallels between myself and him. In fact, it's kind of funny. I've always, I'm not a real assertive person. I'm not one to just like speak out, you know, I don't like confrontation. So if someone says something even that I don't agree with, I'm not usually one to speak up. But one thing since I was a little kid, I've always felt so protective of the people I love. If

someone that I love is being hurt by someone or being talked about in a bad way, like, I feel like this transformation, like something inside of me switches and I can defend them and I can stand up like, I hope that I'm, of course, tactful about it. But I can do that in a way I can't do it about myself. But I just feel so so fiercely protective of my loved ones. And like I said, I was that way for as long as I can remember.

Melissa Knapp 24:50

And as I was like getting memories from my grandmother, I noticed it, like every memory she shared about him, her father, he was always protecting somebody. Everything he did was, he was so, so protective. And I just... I said that to her one day I was like, "Do you realize, like how protective he was?" And she was like, "You know, I don't know if I really thought about it. But yeah, you're right." And so that was neat, because I really do feel like, wow, maybe there is a reason that I'm that way. You know, maybe, maybe I got that from him. Maybe that's part of our connection. And maybe that's why he's one of the ones... That maybe that's why he brought me a message is because that we have a connection. Yeah, so that's been really neat.

Melissa Knapp 25:32

Oh, and one other little thing that I'll say about him too, is that... So after World War I, after he was gassed, so he was an engineer. He worked on the railroads and like built roads in the Argonne forest in France, and he was a super, super hard worker. But after getting gassed, he came home and he started working on the railroads but he couldn't keep up, like he just would have to sit down take a break. He couldn't catch his breath. At that point, you know, they just didn't have things in place for veterans. So his bosses and things were not very understanding of his health issues.

Melissa Knapp 26:08

He decided to become a farmer. He felt like that was all he could do to be able to work at his own pace. And he did like, oh my goodness, the things that he did were amazing. And he actually built houses and helped other families build houses. So he was a very hard worker, but he just had to do it on his own pace. And one thing that my grandmother had said, like, it's, it kind of breaks my heart to think about, but that maybe there were times like he didn't feel, I guess maybe he felt like a failure sometimes because he wasn't able to do the things that he had planned. His life didn't look the way that it looked. They had plenty of food, and they had a nice home, you know, it was sufficient for for their needs and things, but they were just a little farming family. And so I think he carried a lot of weight from that and feeling like maybe he wasn't good enough.

Melissa Knapp 26:59

And yet when I hear his stories, and I think about the person that he was, and everything that I've learned about him, like, I'm just so proud of who he was, and how he just continued to protect and love others and things like that. And so, you know, that's meant a lot to me, just because, you know, there are times that I feel like, maybe I'm not progressing with something as quickly as I would like. Or, you know, maybe my life isn't, maybe I haven't accomplished the things that I thought I would by this point in my life, or by my age, or if I feel like I'm, I want to do something, but it's coming slow. Like, I think about him, because I think, you know, I'm able to look at his whole life and I'm able to have, you know,

sum it up. And it's to me very successful because of the things that he did. And you know, what a great family man he was and the love that he gave his kids and the protection and what a great father. He was. You know, his His love and His sacrifices for others that makes him successful, you know, to me makes him someone that I can look up to wasn't what was in his bank account or something like that it was. It just made me realize like how important that is. And those kind of things have helped me to kind of just have a broader perspective of life. And you know, our purpose and things in life doesn't always turn out how we think it will. But as long as we're doing our best it will, they'll still be beautiful, and it will be what it's meant to be.

Heather Murphy 28:33

I think that's really significant. A lot of times we look at our ancestors to learn about them, and see what we can learn from their lives. But in, as you explain this, I can see how as we learn about our ancestors, we can acknowledge the gifts that they gave us, the lives that they lived, the things that they did that made it so that we could have the lives that we do, and give gratitude to them for that. And like you said, but he didn't think that he was enough maybe. But we have... But now we can have generations that can say "Thank you, Grandpa. You were enough."

Melissa Knapp 29:11

Yeah. Oh, yeah, definitely. And we are. We're so proud of him. He was, he was a great man. Wonderful man.

Heather Murphy 29:20

Thank you so much for telling these family stories and experiences. Now, before we close, could you give a little bit of advice to people who are thinking about starting to learn their family's stories?

Melissa Knapp 29:33

Yeah, absolutely. I would say my advice for someone who's just a beginner or wanting to get started is just start, don't wait. If there's a time and a season for family history, it's right now because you will have experiences, you will learn lessons that will be applicable to whatever it is that you're going through right now. It will be amazing as you see that if you're willing to, you know, not saying family history is always easy, you got... anything worth having is worth putting in some work, right? But it'll come. Those moments, they'll come.

Melissa Knapp 30:08

And the thing that I love also about doing family history is that it's so personal. It is so personal. That the experiences that you have are going to be completely different than my experiences, but they're going to be exactly what you need. And as you learn these things, you'll be able to help your family members as well, like your children or grandchildren or siblings and it's such a great way to bond with family, the, even the living family, to be able to share these things. And it's such a wonderful opportunity to be able to take those lessons and stories incorporate them into our lives now. And you know, just like the genetics are passed down and those genetics create who we are, we can take those lessons and stories and make that into part of our story, into who we are and who we become. I feel like that is just the best use of our history.

Melissa Knapp 31:01

I feel like sometimes people might be a little afraid of what they're going to find or because sometimes there are things that are difficult in families and that was certainly the case in mine. But I actually kind of had an opposite experience that I found so much good. I found so many things to be proud of in my family history. That doesn't mean I've turned a blind eye to difficult things because everybody's human, everybody makes mistakes, and life is hard. Life is hard. And we're, most of us, I think, are all just doing the best that we can. But there's just so much to learn and to be gained that if you're willing to just put yourself out there and explore and as you read these things, like, try to internalize them and really think about like, how, how can I grow from this? How can... What can I learn from this? Then it really will be a beautiful personal experience and it will be one that will be yours alone, and that no one can replicate. It will be just yours, and I love that. I love that it's so personally catered for each of us in our needs.

Heather Murphy 32:04

Thank you so much for everything that you've shared. Please listeners go and look at her website, kindredgrove.com. She is a wonderful writer and storyteller. I've really enjoyed going through and reading some of the things that she's written. They're beautiful. And we'll also have all of her other contact information in the show notes. So thank you, Melissa. And thank you to all our listeners, and have a great day.

Melissa Knapp 32:29

Thank you so much, Heather. I appreciate you having me on. This is great.

Stories in Our Roots 32:34

Thank you for joining me today for Stories in Our Roots. Please help this podcast grow by subscribing, leaving a review and sharing it with your friends. If you have feedback, or would like to recommend someone to share their story, head to storiesinourroots.com and fill out the form. Thanks again for listening and I look forward to being with you again next week.