



## 33 of the Best Activities for Families to Understand & Connect to Their Ancestors

Sharlene Habermeyer, MA

### RootsTech 2024 Outline

**Learning Objectives:** Here are 33 ways to get to know your ancestors. Just incorporate and replicate your ancestors' interests, hobbies and talents into your family activities. The following ideas are universally applicable, fun, educational and presented with a 21<sup>st</sup> century spin. Use these activities to cement unique remembrances of your lineage and enhance a greater understanding, appreciation and love for past family members.

You've all heard the saying: "Hear and forget. See and remember. **DO and UNDERSTAND.**" If you want your children/grandchildren to remember and connect to their ancestors, and pass on your family's genealogy legacy, adding the "do" is essential.

Directions, supply list, activities, and downloads for each activity are included on the posts (links below)

### Preliminary Activities: Getting Started

First, search your family tree for STORIES about your ancestors. Make a list of their names along with their stories, activities, hobbies, and interests. This will give you a springboard to create activities to help your children/grandchildren connect to and REMEMBER each ancestor.

Here are nine categories, ideas, activities and books to enhance your ancestor experiences.

### #1 HOW ANCESTORS READ AND DECIPHERED SIGNS IN NATURE

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/reading-signs-in-nature/>
- **TITLE:** 6 Amazing Tricks of Yesteryear: How Our Ancestors Read Signs in Nature
- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/bird-watching/>
- **TITLE:** How to Teach Your Kids About Awesome Birdwatching!
- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/bird-watching-for-kids/>
- **TITLE:** Here are 11 Amazing Activities: Birdwatching for Kids & Grandkids!

Understanding nature was “second-nature” to your ancestors. They knew and understood how to decipher signs in nature which helped them find food, avoid danger, predict weather, point directions, and more.

Be an ancestor by being observant and reading and deciphering signs in nature such as:

- The way trees bend indicates wind direction
- Roots of a tree indicate the sun’s direction and lack of space for tree growth
- Butterflies hint of weather
- A sand dune shows wind direction
- The scent of cinnamon suggests altitude
- Budding flowers point south
- The Big Dipper in the Northern Hemisphere is used to tell time, etc.

## SUGGESTED READING

- Book: *The Lost Art of Reading Nature’s Signs* by Tristan Gooley
- Book: *Exploring Nature* by Kim Andrews
- Book: *Nature Anatomy* by Julia Rothman
- Book: *The Secret Signs of Nature* by Craig Caudill
- Book: *Nature’s Hidden Charms* by Liz Dean
- Book: *Noticing* by Kobi Yamada
- Book: *The Listening Walk* by Paul Showers

## ACTIVITIES

- **GO ON A LISTENING WALK.** Listen for sounds in nature. Why was it important that our ancestors listened for sounds in nature? (free download on post)
- **OBSERVE COLORS IN NATURE.** Make a color board from cardboard and colored paper. Find colors in nature that correspond to the colors on your boards and attach the item to your board. It’s a lesson in observation and sensory input.
- **FIND BUGS AND INSECTS.** Take photos of bugs and insects you discover in nature. Using bug-part stamps, create creative, colorful and interesting bugs and insects.
- **WHITTILING** (folk art indigenous to the Ozarks). Practice the art of whittling first using Ivory Soap bars and cookie cutters. For older children use soft wood. A whittling kit is suggested.
- **BIRDWATCHING.** Discover birds in nature and make stained glass birds using recycled materials. Do you have ancestors who watched birds or raised them? What tips did they leave about birdwatching?
- **GO CAMPING.** This universal activity is practiced around the world, but the reasons for camping have morphed over the ages. Why did your ancestors camp and why do families camp today? Learn how to pitch a tent, build a fire and read a compass.

## #2 ANCESTOR TOYS FOUND IN NATURE

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/natures-best-toys/>
- **TITLE:** 15 Super Fun Ways of Playing with Nature's Best Toys!

Toy stores were non-existent until 1770. Because they were expensive, children found entertaining and educational toys in nature for free. Discover how and why these free “toys” (mud, water, sticks, rocks, sand) are still in vogue today and the importance of “play.”

### SUGGESTED READING

- Book: *Mud!* By Annie Bailey
- Book: *The Marvelous Mud House* by April Graney
- Book: *Mud Pie Maggie* by Courage Kernel
- Book: *Ricky the Rock That Couldn't Roll* by Mr. Jay
- Book: *Stick and Stone* by Beth Ferry
- Book: *All the Water in the World* by George Ella Lyon
- Book: *Water* by Frank Asch
- Book: *Under Your Feet: Soil, Sand and Everything Underground* by Wenjia Tang

### ACTIVITIES

- **CREATE A MUD KITCHEN.** Let your children/grandchildren play in the mud as your ancestors did. Teach them to sift, measure, pour & create with water, sand and mud. Playing in mud increases a child's physical and emotional health; relaxes the muscles and mind, boosts the immune system and increases sensory play.
- **PAINT WITH WATER, MAKE A WATER TABLE & MORE.** Research shows that waterplay for kids helps with social interaction, improves fine and gross motor skills, and increases imagination and creativity. Our ancestors most likely did not know the benefits of waterplay—they just loved playing in water! Learn about different ways to enjoy water by creating a water table, painting with water, water balloons, and fun with water at the beach or mountains.
- **GET CREATIVE WITH STICKS.** Your ancestors loved playing with sticks and so do kids today. Sticks provide learning through building confidence, self-esteem, resilience, problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills. Remember your ancestors and make a walking stick, a magic wand stick, bookmarker sticks and bug sticks.
- **USING ROCKS AS BUILDING BLOCKS.** Your ancestors found lots to do with rocks—throwing them, skipping them across water and using them as building blocks. Rock and stone play increases fine motor skills, strength and dexterity—all important for writing skills. Learn ways of creating with rocks as your kids/grandkids paint them; create a miniature Stonehenge or make “kindness rocks” perfect for hiding in nature.

### **#3 PLANTING AN ANCESTOR EMOTIONAL GARDEN**

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/ancestor-garden/>
- **TITLE:** 7 Fun Activities Creating Memories with an Herbal Ancestor Garden

Emotional gardening involves remembering your ancestors who not only sustained their families through the land but were also emotionally attached to the land through gardening and farming. Here are ideas to create an emotional garden with a focus on herbs and flowers and how to use them to remember your ancestors.

#### **SUGGESTED READING**

- Book: *The Gardener* by Sarah Stewart

#### **ACTIVITIES**

- **DRIP-PAINTED FLOWER POTS.** Make drip-painted flower pots and plant in them flowers or herbs your ancestors would have planted.
- **PLANT HERBS IN POTS.** Plant herbs and learn about the healing aspects of herbs.
- **MAKE AN MEDICINAL TEA FROM HERBS.** Your ancestors made medicinal teas from the herbs, flower and plants they grew. They helped reduce inflammation, lower blood sugar, improve digestion and circulation and increased the immune system. Included is a recipe for a medicinal herbal tea made by my ancestors.
- **MAKE A GARDENER'S SCRUB.** Avid gardeners/farmers like many of your ancestors relied on borax and baking soda to get the dirt out of their hands. They were also drying and harsh. Included is a gardener's scrub recipe that is effective and gentle.

### **#4 FLORIOGRAPHY: THE ART OF APPLYING MEANING TO FLOWERS**

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/floriography-for-kids/>
- **TITLE:** 7 Amazing Ways to Learn About Your Ancestors Using Floriography for Kids!

Floriography, the art of applying meaning to flowers, has been practiced for centuries beginning in Constantinople, Turkey. It spread to Europe in 1717 and is enjoyed today throughout the world. The first dictionary of floriography was published in 1819. Here are different activities to practice the art of floriography and remember your ancestors.

#### **SUGGESTED READING**

- Book: *The Complete Language of Flowers* by S. Theresa Dietz
- Book: *The Language of Flowers* by Dena Seiferling
- Book: *Floriography: An Illustrated Guide to the Victorian Language of Flowers*
- Book: *Slow Down: 50 Mindful Moments in Nature*
- Game: Floriferous Card Games
- Game: Laurence King Tree Families: A Botanical Card Game

## ACTIVITIES

- **HAMMERING FLOWERS.** More than likely, your ancestors preserved flowers by pressing them between heavy books. However, hammering flowers is a quicker process, the results interesting and has been practiced and refined for over 20 years. Learn about and replicate the art of hammering flowers
- **PRINTMAKING FLOWERS.** immortalize flowers through the art of printmaking. Printmaking uses ink or paint and allows you to see the details of the flower. Take your printed posies and create a paper bouquet!
- **COMBINING NATURE, ARTS & FLOWERS.** Grab an embroidery hoop, attach a mesh fabric and go for a nature walk and weave flowers and plants into your hoop. To keep it forever, use artificial flowers.

## #5 A VICTORIAN TEA PARTY

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/victorian-tea-parties/>
- **TITLE:** 7 Amazing Ways to Celebrate Victorian Tea Parties with Family!

Tea parties or ceremonies are considered an ancient art practiced globally today. Starting in China, this tradition traveled around the world. When tea reached England, it took the country by storm. They created spectacular Victorian Tea Parties that are still popular today. Plan a fun Victorian Tea Party with your children or grandchildren while celebrating your ancestors.

## SUGGESTED READING

- Book: *Taking Tea with Alice: Looking Glass Tea Parties* by Dawn Hylton & Diane Sedo
- Book: *Come to Tea: Fun Tea Party Themes, Recipes, Craft, Games, Etiquette and More* by Stephanie Dunnewind
- Book: *A Literary Tea Party: Blends and Treats* by Alison Walsh
- Book: *A-Z Victorian Tea Party Alphabet Book* by Alida Scheiderer
- Book: *Tea Party Recipes* by Tia Halat
- Book: *Let's Have Our Own Victorian Tea* by Meredith Curtis
- Book: *The Official Downtown Abbey Afternoon Tea Cookbook* by Downtown Abbey

## ACTIVITIES

- **A TEA PARTY MENU TO CELEBRATE YOUR ANCESTORS** Create a menu with foods that compliment where your ancestors originated. To celebrate our ancestors, we had English Scones & lemon curd, French Boursin Cheese Quiche, English Trifle, Swedish Peach tea. What recipes will you make to remember your ancestors?
- **THE TEA PARTY HAT & HANDKERCHIEF** Between the 1600 to mid-1900s, women did not leave their homes without wearing a hat. Make a colorful tea party hat and don't forget your linen handkerchief!

- **VICTORIAN TEA PARTY GAMES.** Every party needs games—including tea parties. Check out the Victorian Tea Party game on the post—perfect for breaking the ice!
- **MAKE A RAG WREATH WITH SKELETON KEYS.** Make a rag wreath and attach some skeleton keys—share the history of skeletons keys for a fun tea party activity. Skeleton keys have been around since the Middle Ages and were used to open doors, etc., until the 1940s. They symbolized the “key to one’s heart,” or the key to “unlocking the door.”

## **#6 FIBER ARTS: HOW OUR ANCESTORS CREATED CLOTH, USING WOOL ROVING, SPINNING, WEAVING & DYEING**

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/teaching-fiber-arts-to-kids/>
- **TITLE:** Teaching Fiber Arts to Kids—Learn How to Dye, Spin, & Weave Like Our Ancestors

Cultures all over the world have produced wool roving from sheared sheep and carted wool. Spinning wool and other fibers into yarn, using plants for natural dyeing and weaving yarn are ways our ancestors’ made cloth and clothes. Simplify and teach these ancient skills to your children/grandchildren as you reminisce about the work your ancestors expended to create fabric and clothes.

### **SUGGESTED READING**

- Book: *Finding Form with Fiber* by Ruth Woods
- Book: *Botanical Colour at Your Fingertips* by Rebecca Desnos
- Book: *Eco Color: Botanical Dyes for Beautiful Textiles* by India Flint
- Book: *Weaving on a Little Loom* by Fiona Daly
- Book: *Inventive Weaving on a Little Loom* by Syne Mitchell
- Book: *Respect the Spindle: Spin Infinite Yarns with One Amazing Tool* by Abby Franquemont
- Book: *The Whole Craft of Spinning: From the Raw Material to the Finished Yarn* by Carol Kroll

### **ACTIVITIES**

- **THE ART OF SPINNING WOOL.** Wool sheared from sheep, alpaca, merino, angora, etc., is called wool roving. Using a drop spindle, Navajo spindle or spinning wheel, spin the wool roving into yarn. Wool roving has been made by our ancestors all over the world and is still made today using carding tools.
- **NATURAL DYES.** Our ancestors created natural dyes using plants and herbs found in their gardens. However, using a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach, dye wool roving using Kool-Aid. It’s faster, easier with less mess and the results are fabulous.

- **WEAVING ON A LOOM.** Your ancestors used floor looms, table looms Inkle looms and upright looms to make fabric, rugs, wall-hangings and more. Using a simple cardboard loom, and dyed wool roving, learn the art and process of weaving.
- **TIE-DYE.** Tie-dye had its' beginnings in China and Japan. It was a laborious process and was done outside to avoid things catching the dye. Today, there are easier ways of teaching children/grandchildren how to tie-dye. Using permanent markers, embroidery hoops and isopropyl alcohol you can tie-dye t-shirts, canvas shoes, scrunchies, tote bags and more...

## **#7 ANCESTOR HANDIWORK, EMBROIDERY**

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/embroidery-and-handiwork/>
- **TITLE:** 5 Fun Ways to Teach Your Kids About Their Ancestors' Embroidery & Handiwork

Embroidery is practiced all over the world, in every culture and boasts over 300 different stitches. It originated in the Pacific Rim countries and Middle East. Eventually it was brought to Europe and finally to America. Here are some examples of embroidery and their origination:

- Sashiko (Japan)
- Kantha (India & Bangladesh)
- Cross Stitch (Peru)
- Hedebo or Drawn Thread (Denmark)
- Hardanger or Whitework (Norway)
- Needlepoint (Egypt)
- Molas (Panama, Central America)
- Miao Embroidery or Story Cloth (Hmong)

Using a 21<sup>st</sup> century spin on handiwork of the past, teach your children/grandchildren these embroidery skills as they remember their ancestors.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

- Book: *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle* by Clare Hunter
- Book: *Grandfather's Story Cloth* by Linda Gerdner
- Book: *Molas! Patterns, Techniques and Projects for Colorful Applique* by Kate Mathews
- Book: *Breathe Like a Bear* by Kira Willey

## **ACTIVITIES**

- **MAKE A PAPER MOLA.** Guna Mola's are indigenous to Panama and Central and South America (previously spelled "Cuna" or "Kuna.") Utilizing 7-layers of fabric, and reverse applique, they create very colorful designs. We made our mola's using different layers of colored paper and traditional animal templates.



- **EMBROIDER A STORY CLOTH.** Story cloths began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with the Bayeux Tapestry—an embroidered piece 224 feet long. Like all story cloths—this tapestry tells the conquest of England by the Duke of Normandy. The Hmong people of Vietnam as refugees in Thailand, made story cloths telling of their history with the U.S. and Vietcong during the Vietnam War. Teach your children/grandchildren how to make unique and creative story cloths using symbols of their activities with parents or grandparents while celebrating ancestors.
- **EMBROIDER A MEDITATION CLOTH.** Meditation or healing cloths are relatively new and provide a way to find calm amidst the challenges of life using embroidery. All that is required is a simple running stitch, cloth and breathing techniques. Discover how women and men used the art of embroidery as a way to experience peace and calm.

**NOTE:** Check out “The Loose Ends Project.” If one of your loved ones passes, and leaves behind unfinished handiwork, embroidery, knitting, crocheting, sewing, etc., --this company can finish the project for you. See: <https://www.looseendsproject.org/>

## **#8 HISTORY & UNIQUENESS OF QUILTING**

- **WEBSITE:** <https://goodparentingbrighterchildren.com/story-quilts/>
- **TITLE:** Here’s An Amazing History of Story Quilts and How to Make Your Own!

The history of quilting can be traced back to medieval times, originating in Europe, India and the Far East. In Pakistan, they are called Ralli quilts and in India they are called Kantha quilts, but the early settlers in America to the present have made quilting a unique storytelling art!

To narrow this subject, I’m going to focus on some of the richly diverse STORY quilts made in America, the history behind them and activities we did to celebrate these talented quiltmakers.

Story quilts include pictures, images, symbols, fabrics and textures that are used to tell a story of the family’s life and experiences. A story quilt can tell a story by the way the quilt is crafted or it can tell a story of the person who quilted it—both ways make the quilt memorable.

Some Story Quilts in America include:

- Amish Quilts
- Appalachian Story Quilts
- Native American Quilts
- African American Story Quilts

## **SUGGESTED READING**

- Book: *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* by Susan Goldman Rubin
- Book: *The Quiltmaker’s Gift* by Jeff Brumbeau and Gail de Marcken
- Book: *Story Quilts: Appalachian Women Speak* by Shannon Hitchcock
- Book: *Plain and Simple* by Sue Bender



- Book: *Hidden in Plain View* by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard
- Book: *Reuben and the Quilt* by Merle Good

## ACTIVITIES

- **A STORY QUILT: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO MAKING A GEES BEND QUILT FROM CHILDREN'S BOOKS.** The story of the Gees Bend Quilt makers surfaced in 2002 when their unique and very artistic quilts were discovered by art dealers in New York. From impoverished beginnings, these women have made history with their quilts being showcased and found in museums throughout the world. With your children/grandchildren, create a similar copy-cat Gees Bend quilt from the pages and covers of books—telling another unique and memorable story!
- **MAKE A PAPER TAPE-RESISTANT QUILT.** Quilting has a rich history and has been practiced in every country in the world. Make watercolor quilt pieces to celebrate your ancestors using tape-resistant art techniques.

## Conclusion

THE IMPORTANCE OF TALKING TO THE OLDEST PERSON IN THE ROOM.

If you want to gain insights into your family tree; other family trees or just gain incredible wisdom about life—talk to the “oldest person in the room.” Learn from their vast life experiences which encompasses their knowledge, their wisdom and their poignant understanding of life’s lessons!