

## **Giving Thanks Nov. 21, 2010**

Although Thanksgiving as we celebrate it is a quintessential American holiday, there are harvest festivals all over the planet which celebrate the abundance of the harvest and ask for continued good crops from whatever source they imagine, perhaps a monotheistic God or Mother Nature, a local deity. Having ample food just after the harvest and some free time from the hard work in the fields are two aspects of all harvest festivals.

For example, there's the ancient Shinto rice festival of *Ni-iname-sai*. This is a time when an offering of the first fruits of a year's grain harvest is shared with the deities for their blessings. In China, the Moon Festival or Zhongqiu is celebrated as one of the more important dates in the Chinese calendar.

In Ghana, the Yam Festival (Homowo) lasts three days and marks the end of the harvest. The festival begins with a cleansing ceremony to honor family members who have died. Farmers give thanks to the gods who ensure a good harvest. Twins and triplets are honored during this time as a special gift from God.

Wikipedia (and do we trust Wikipedia?) claims that harvest festivals typically contain the following elements: a time of feasting, both with family and community, contests, merriment, and romance. American Thanksgivings, having being started by the Puritans, somewhat shortchanged us on the romance and merriment part.

Nowadays the Thanksgiving contests have evolved into spectator sports for the most part. Let's listen a moment. (listen to 30-second football touchdown on CD).

### **The Lord's Acre sale**

I grew up in a mountainous region of southwest Virginia. There were 3 roads out of my town and each one crossed a mountain. Giles County was predominantly Methodist, owing to the prodigious work of the circuit riders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These travelling preachers rode their horses from community to hamlet and founded small Methodist congregations in rural farming valleys throughout the mountains. The tradition evolved for church members to set aside one acre of their land as a kind of tithe to the church. Back home each autumn the farmers gathered for a Lord's Acre sale. They brought in produce, home-made molasses and other handcrafts and the proceeds went to their various churches. This is truly a harvest festival.

On Thanksgiving day, my parents typically went to the Virginia Tech vs. VMI football game. I stayed home and watched the annual Macy's Parade on TV. (Did any of you grow up with that tradition?) Did I mention that we lived in the mountains? One of the several reasons I didn't go to the ballgame was that I usually got carsick either on the way to the game or the way back home. So I had a lot of incentive to stay put. Meanwhile my grandmother Roller was cooking her famous Thanksgiving dinner to be eaten later that afternoon when my parents returned from the game.

After watching the Macy's parade, one of my jobs each Thanksgiving was to help

Grandmother prepare a Waldorf salad (apples, celery, walnuts and maybe grapes) and to this day I make Waldorf salad for Thanksgiving (you can try some at the potluck in a few minutes).

Since my family were all tee-totaling Baptists, there was absolutely no alcohol associated with any holiday including Thanksgiving, but I take it that in many households, alcohol perhaps supplies some of the merriment and maybe even romance that is supposed to accompany a harvest festival. We were authentic neo-Puritans, good ole Southern Baptist Calvinists of a strict bent.

In the 1950's strict Southern Baptists did not drink alcohol, smoke, or gamble. However, it was ok to play games like Rook or Authors or Old Maid with non-gambling cards. We were not supposed to go to the movies on Sunday (well TV kind of wrecked that because what's the difference in going to a movie or watching a movie on TV?) or go dancing (mind you, square dancing was acceptable because it didn't involve too much physical contact that might lead to merriment or romance.)

Since I personally think many Americans got cheated with our version of the harvest festival in the romance and merriment departments, I'd like to gently suggest for all of you who are willing to turn and kiss your neighbor -- perhaps while giggling. Go ahead, it won't hurt. (Pause) There, see, and no mistletoe was harmed in the making of this new Thanksgiving tradition.

I have asked my good friend, the Rev. Levente Lázár to share with us some of his memories of Thanksgiving in Transylvania. As an introduction, I want to speak the words from the hymn we will be singing in a few minutes:

**This is my home, the country where my heart is  
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine  
But other hearts in other lands are beating  
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.**

-- Jay Roller