**Rusyn Marital Customs and Superstitions**

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Let us - you and I - picture in our minds the Rusyn weddings which were celebrated in the early decades of this century. Of course, we will note that those early marital celebrations did not have the significant necessities of present day weddings. In the early 1900's there were no bridal shoppes, no florists, no printed invitations, no special photographers, no limousines or automobiles, no bakeries, no catered dinners and no ballrooms.

Nevertheless, the absence of the essentials of a modern wedding did not prevent the Rusyn men and women from Carpathian Rus' from entering into matrimony.

They reached the marital goal by first meeting each other while working for their parents in the fields, or on special occasions and holy days, in the homes of elders where and when they participated in folk singing, dancing, telling or listening to stories and fables, and playing superstitious games.

Especially very significant for the young Rusyns was the celebration of Saint Andrew's Day in Kamjonka of Spiš County on November 30, according to the Julian calendar. This day really had a special meaning for the Carpatho-Rusyn boys and girls in the early decades of this century.

**St. Andrew's Day Superstitions**

On Saint Andrew's Day the young Rusyns of the Old Country would melt some lead in small portions which then were thrown into cold water and soon there emerged various figures from the rapidly cooling lead. These figures would then be used to foretell the future of the young Rusyns present. Unfortunately the author, Ivan Ladizinsky, did not describe how this was done, I hope some of our readers can submit this information.

After looking at the leaden figures, the young women began cooking pirohi, each of which had the name of a young man concealed within. The first pirohi to rise to the top of the boiling water was opened to reveal the name of the young man who was hopefully to become the husband of the young woman who had concealed his name. Undoubtedly, this pirohi procedure was also used in the case of some other pirohi rising to the top of the boiling water. Perhaps this is the reason why our Rusyn mothers enjoyed preparing and cooking pirohi for their families.

The following superstition was used to determine when the young man would tell his parents that he was going to get married to the young woman who had concealed his name in the pirohi. The young women made some wreaths and went outside the hut to hurl them at the branches of a nearby tree. If a wreath were caught on a branch at the first attempt, it was superstitiously believed that the fortunate young woman would be married to the young man, whose name was hidden in the pirohi, within the first year. If the second attempt was successful, she would be a bride in the second year and so forth....

There was another superstition as to the time of the wedding. In this instance, the eligible maiden would knock at night on a pig sty. If the pig "oinked" on the first knock, it signified that the young woman would be married within a year. If the "oinking" came on the second or third knock, she would have to wait two or three years before those "wedding bells" would ring for her.

Yes, there was an additional superstition to determine when the wedding would take place. According to this superstition, id the maiden had successfully stolen some chopped wood from a neighbor at the very first nightly attempt, she would be married within a year. Since the older and married neighbors knew about this superstition, they made it quite easy for the young woman to succeed in her marital quest.

**Parents Hear of Their Son's Marriage Intentions**

About 58 years ago I translated into English, Nicholas A. Hornyak's lengthy Rusyn article on "The Marriage Customs of the Carpatho-Russians", (Carpatho-Rusyns) of the Laborec Valley of Zemplin County of present day Slovakia. Most of the following is a revised and condensed version of that translation.

If a young man desired marriage, he had to ask his parents for their consent. After he received the parental approval, he started a serious courtship with the maiden he wanted to be his wife. The first step in the direction of marriage was the betrothal announcement somewhat quietly in the presence of the "engaged" couples parents and family members. In most cases no "engagement ring" was given. The betrothal announcement meeting was held in the home of the maiden. At the same time the parents of the betrothed couple started to bargain about the dowry of the bride-to-be which was to be given to her husband-to-be. All present enjoyed a feast which consisted of cheese, rice, pirohi and liquid spirits and refreshments. After the two sets of parents agreed on the dowry, they gave their blessings and determined the date of the wedding.

Immediately after the betrothal event, the "engaged" couple went to their priest for the preparation of the banns announcements. The intended wife was not present in church when the first banns were announced because it was believed that her future mother in law would become angry. However, the groom to be had to be present, because if he were not, he would be subjected to and ruled by his wife.

After the third announcement and a week before the wedding date, the "fiancee" gave her "fiancé" an expensive handkerchief, symbolic of her love for him. This usually occurred in the morning when preparations were being made for another feast. The grooms ushers were was tied together with a lengthy towel, symbolizing that the couple would be bound together not only by love but also by law.

As the wedding day drew near, there was a great deal of activity in the homes of both sets of parents who were making preparations for the important event, in addition to cooking and baking for the feasts. Relatives and neighbors helped by bringing gifts of food such as cheese, meats, baked goods, etc.

The celebrations prior to the wedding started at the home of the groom who danced with all his ushers (druzbove), signifying that the pre-marital feasting had begun. Upon completion of this dance routine, fiddlers played enthusiastically while the youth danced and sang merrily.

Exactly at midnight before the wedding, the young women, including the bridesmaids gathered in the home of the bride for the purpose of making wreaths from the "barvinok" - periwinkle. Widows were not permitted to witness the wreath making in Ugoch County because it was believed, according to George Gulanich, a native Ugochan, that it would bring misfortune to the newlyweds.

As the bridesmaids were making the wreaths the sang the following:

*"Barvinku, barvinku, l'ubl'u t'a nositi,*

*No pro chlopca molodoho mušu t'a lišiti."*

Translated into English the above two lines are:

*"Periwinkle, periwinkle, I love to wear thee,*

*But because of a young man I must leave thee."*

The following was sung about the groom:

*"Chija tota zastavochka*

*Ponad selo machajetsja?" I tak dale.*

The above two Rusyn line in English are:

*"Whose banner is it that is flapping*

*In the wind over the village?" and so forth.*

After the wreaths were completed, the maid of honor took each one separately and place them on bread to be used in the wedding procession and ceremony by the bridegroom and the bridesmaids. She then made three complete dance revolutions in the center of the room. Then the fiddlers played some music while the young people danced to a few tunes and then retired to rest for the "Big Day".

On the morning of the wedding day they got up very early in the groom's home. Even the fiddlers came early to play dance music for each of the members of the grooms family. As noon approached, a "starosta" - old leader - was selected. Accepting the leadership, the starosta called the matchmakers to sit at the table to sing marital songs while they dined and drank beverages. At the same time the groom prepared himself for the farewell episode with his parents.

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**Rusyn Marital Customs and Superstitions - Part 2**

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**The Farewell Episode**

One of the ushers loudly proclaimed: "Father, mother, family and relatives: Please sit down at the table." The parents appeared and sat at the table. A bridesmaid then led the singing of the following Rusyn song:

*"Oj prijdi, rodino, I uvidi svojeho syna*

*Bo 'mu priblizhajetsja posl'idna hodina,*

*Ne bude sja zvati vecej parobochok,*

*Bo on podarujet miloj svoj vinochok."*

A translation of the Rusyn song is as follows:

*"Oh come, family, to see your beloved son*

*For whom approaches the farewell hour,*

*No longer shall he be called a swain,*

*Because he will give a wreath to his sweetheart."*

After the rendition of this song, the "starosta" requested the parents to bless their kneeling son. Having received the parental blessing, the groom embraced and kissed them. And he did the same with all present. The mother and sisters started to cry. The sobbing brought about the rendition of the following Rusyn song:

*"Oj ne plach mamochko, a t'išisja tomu:*

*Privede ti synochok l'udinu do domu.*

*L'udinu do domu tebji robotnicu*

*A serdcu mojemu pomochnicu."*

A literal translation of the above Rusyn song is as follows:

*"Oh mother, don't cry, but be happy*

*Your dear son will bring a person into your home.*

*A person to your home, a worker for you*

*And for my heart a dear helpmate."*

After the farewells had been made, the wedding procession lined up to go top the bride's home. However, before the departure, the groom's mother blessed him and the group with holy water and encircled them three times. She did this to signify a happy journey. Singing merrily along the way, the procession soon reached the bride's home.

The standard-bearer headed the procession, proudly holding the banner which the bridesmaids made for him. Behind him came the groom and his ushers, "svaški" and young people. Also present were the musicians. All the way to the bride's home, they sang the Rusyn song: "Mam frajirku!"

The following is an English translation of the Rusyn song "Mam frajirku."

*"A sweetheart I have who will tell me what to do*

*I will embrace and kiss her on a wayside road,*

*On a strewn road the cop won't halt me*

*And the burgess won't stop us, so we will smooch."*

When the procession came close to the bride's home, the young people stopped singing, and the bridesmaids began another song:

*"We're proceeding farther and where we will stop*

*In Pipnak's landed estate where Maria waits for us."*

But something unexpected happened when the procession reached the bride's home. The door was locked and could not be opened, thus causing the "starosta" to knock three times on the door and loudly inform those inside: *"Highly respected people: we are searching for someone who has been lost and the trail leads to this home."*

The "starosta" implied that the procession had come to get the bride. From the inside came the reply: "*Only the devil might know who you are!" Maybe you are robbers and it would be risky to let you inside. Show us some identification and tell us why you came here."*

The elder leader of the procession - the "starosta" - took the banner from the standard-bearer and said: *"This is the evidence which brought us here. It is similar to the 'Star of Bethlehem' which led the three Wise Men to Jesus in the manger."* After a continued debate an agreement was finally reached concerning the amount of whiskey which was to be brought inside, the procession was permitted to go into the bride's home. Once inside, the "starosta" and the groom continued looking for the "lost person", while the questioning continued. Finally, the matron of honor was brought in to be recognized by the groom. He was unable to "recognize" her and made vehement denials that she was not the "lost person". The matron of honor then went to the side of the best man while the fiddlers played some marital music. The same procedure was followed in the pairing of the ushers and bridesmaids. Then everyone waited for the arrival of the 'lost person', for they knew that the bride would soon enter. When she was brought in, the groom quickly hurried to meet his "lost person" - the bride in a beautiful white gown with a special wreath atop her head. Before the wedding procession started on its way to church, the bride and groom received the parental blessings.

(Writers note: Sometimes the "starosta" would say "lost fox" instead of "lost person")

It was a singing procession, led by the fiddlers, going on its way to church for the marriage ritual. The following Rusyn verses were sung:

*Koli totu fijalochku sijali,*

*Tohdy my sja l'ubovati pochali;*

*Ale tota fijalochka ne zyšla,*

*Uzh sja naša virna l'ubov rozyšla."*

*"Plachte, ochki plachte,*

*Slezy vybivajte;*

*Koho 'ste l'ubili*

*Vzhe bol'še ne majete."*

The above two verses, freely translated into English are:

*When that violet seed was placed in the ground,*

*A love for each other you and I found;*

*But that violet did not bloom*

*And our faithful love ended in gloom."*

*Oh cry, my eyes, do cry,*

*With tears over your face;*

*The one who had your love,*

*Is not in your heart's place."*

When the wedding procession approached, the parish rectory, the bridesmaids began singing again:

*"Pan Otche, vstavajte,*

*Zasj zarobok mate,*

*Zvinchajete novu paru*

*Kotra otdast Bohu chvalu."*

*"Dear Father, be ready,*

*To benefit again,*

*As you marry this new couple,*

*Whose praise to God will be given."*

After the wedding ceremony was solemnized by the pastor, the procession left the church and went merrily on its way to the bride's home. Upon reaching their destination the wedding party - at least most of it - sat at a table and ate and drank as they continued singing happily. When night approached the group began preparations for the bride's leave-taking from her parents. In front of the home was a carriage in which a hope chest, cushions, etc. Were placed.

After the bride had made her leave-taking from the parents, she and the groom and a part of the procession went into the carriage and headed for the groom's home.

There the bride was met with salt and bread, a symbol of cordial hospitality among the Rusyns. Immediately she was taken into a cool room where spices, seasoned vegetables, etc. Were kept. On her head a nightcap was placed.

Once again the wedding party began their happy singing with the following Rusyn song:

*"Vecherom byla d'lvka*

*V zelenom vinochku,*

*A dnes' jem zhena*

*V burim cipochku."*

This is the literal English version of the above song:

*"Last night I was a maiden,*

*Wearing a green garland,*

*But today I'm a lady,*

*With a grayish nightcap."*

After the above song was rendered, the matron of honor and the bridesmaids led the bride from the cool room to the main room where the bridal dance began. It was then the matron of honor began repeatedly singing *"Nasa mlada kral'ovna" - "Our Young Queen".* Everyone present had to dance with the bride.

As soon as the bridal dance ended, the bride was placed on a table and was given a baby to hold and then a little boy was held. This symbolized that it was the desire of the new household to have a baby boy first.

The musicians continued to play and play, and the harmonious melodies which were heard in the fields by the shepherds, partially awake, thus receiving the glad tidings that the Carpatho-Rusyns were ending the celebration of another traditional wedding.

(Note: When there was a general wedding reception, the invitations were personally made by the ushers or the newlyweds. A general reception was held on the following day or days. This writer has heard where wedding celebrations last a few days sometimes.)