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Folklore provides explanations rich in history

By Mark Hain
 Staff Reporter

Illuminated only by the pale light of the harvest moon, a pile of dry leaves rustles, and then is lifted, spiraling on the wind. Linger in the chilly evening air, the bitter-sweet aroma of wood smoke floats through the blue-black sky. It's a night like a million others, yet something in the air whispers of excitement, and perhaps a bit of danger.

It's a scene and a feeling as timeless as autumn itself. As summer fades, it seems almost as if society comes closer to its traditional roots. Autumn and the harvest are times especially rich in folklore, and at this time of year, the storehouse of our ancestors' myths, traditions and beliefs come closer to the surface.

"Folklore are those materials which are transmitted informally in our culture, primarily by word of mouth," said Roger Welsch, Nebraska author and folklorist. "It's not necessarily false or old; we all have folklore in our lives. It's as new as automobiles and satellites."

"Folklore would be the equivalent of literature, in a broad sense, of a non-literate society," said Oyekan Owomoyela, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln English professor. "Folklore still exists in a modern culture in things such as superstitions, songs and beliefs."

Folk heritage has a major impact on the present. The traditional ways of our ancestors still shape and influence our day to day life.

"The culture, as you have it to-

day, grew out of something," Owomoyela said. "It's nice to be able to see it in the context of what is still real and not completely outgrown."

Although many folkways have not been "outgrown," some are now archaic. Autumn and the harvest were very important times among ancient civilizations, and often a specific deity was connected with the time. In ancient Japan, the goddess Tatsuta-Hime, whose name means "lady who weaves the brocade," was responsible for coloring the leaves. In Russia, the last ears of grain were left for Veles, the god of the harvest.

Among Scandinavians, special sacrifices, known as disablot, were made at harvest time to pacify the Disir, or harvest goddesses. Elsewhere in Scandinavia, great feasts were held in honor of the god Ukko, culminating in a ritual presentation of the crops at a sacred mountain.

Although Ukko and the others may have been long forgotten, some of the practices, notably the ritual gathering, have remained regardless of cultural boundaries. The native Nebraskan traditionally celebrated two harvests, one in August, and a main harvest in October. The Hidatsa had special feasts at this time accompanied by communal corn husking.

Virtually all European cultures

retained the ancient harvest feast. In fact, it seemed to be one of the few common elements among the various ethnic groups of the early settlers. The autumn festival was one last social event before winter trapped the pioneers on their homesteads. Often, these social events were fairs, in which crops would be displayed in celebration of a bountiful harvest.

"It's something that's been done for a millennium," Welsch said. "There's nothing in the Bible that says anything about bringing all your stuff together and having a competition for the largest zucchini, but that's the way it's happened."

As Europeans immigrated to America, they brought with them their folk beliefs, and many of those who settled in Nebraska maintained their harvest traditions, several of which are still alive.

Autumn was considered an especially active time for witches and demons, preparing for the advent of Halloween. Thus, it was impurities. The remnants of this can be seen in the bonfire. Although the purpose has changed from frightening away evil spirits to roasting marshmallows, the roots are the same.

The Cornucopia, or horn of plenty, was also an idea brought to America by immigrants. An annual

favorite for 3rd grade art projects, the horn of plenty stems from the ancient Greek myth of a magic goat whose horns produced grain and fruit.

An ancient folk craft, the weaving of dolls from grain stubble, also can be seen today, as a visit to any arts and crafts store will prove. In the British Isles, it was believed every field had its own protective spirit. The rippling of the grain was caused by the spirit walking about, and not the wind as commonly believed. At harvest time, the spirit retreated to the last standing sheaf of grain. Dolls were made from this sheaf, in which the spirit would live until spring.

Many of these old folkways are less consciously preserved today. Based primarily on family activity, they are annual traditions kept alive through the generations by passing along the techniques and practices connected with it. Welsch said among many of Nebraska's Czechs, there is a tradition of preparing a duck for the harvest feast. Folk crafts, such as hunting and the making of duck blinds, are also products of this type of tradition, Welsch said.

"There are some things that can only be learned through the observations of your father or mother or whatever," Welsch said.

Whether the folk tradition involves sacrificing a calf to the grain goddess or making caramel apples, autumn remains somewhat of a yearly time-warp in which the ancient and the modern are in greater harmony than at any other time.

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