

When I Was A Boy – January 1, 2003

Each fall, a week or two before Thanksgiving, my home church would rent a local school auditorium (most often the Coffin School, as I recall) and decorate it with corn stalks, pumpkins, and other items representative of the season. Colorful gourds and other seasonal embellishments would adorn the tables, which were covered with white cotton cloths and lit by wax candles set in birch-log holders.

It seemed to me that the entire church spent the whole day in preparation for this event - the wives busily baking the pumpkin pies, peeling potatoes, mixing stuffing, and preparing the vegetables - the husbands, when not helping with the more generalized tasks in the kitchen, setting up the banquet room, loading and unloading the produce and sundry other items to and from the cars, and running to the store for the inevitable, indispensable, last-minute items.

How exciting it was to arrive at the hall, well before the dinner. My parents disappeared into the kitchen, taking care of final details, while I helped with setting the tables and other preparatory chores. One of the final tasks from year to year was the placing of five hard kernels of corn by each plate, representative of the Pilgrims' first, meager Thanksgiving meal shortly after their arrival in America.

Finally the much-awaited moment would arrive. The lights were dimmed so only the candles lit the room. The pastor would call us to our places and after a few words of welcome and thanksgiving, would ask the blessing. Then the fun began in earnest.

The men and women who only moments before had been busily finalizing preparations, were now magically transformed into Pilgrim look-a-likes, provided no one scrutinized them too carefully. The women wore dark gray, ankle-length cotton dresses with wide, white collars and white cotton bonnets. The men wore dark, Pilgrim-style belts and coats with white collars, complimented by black construction-paper hats with aluminum-foil-covered cardboard buckles. Both men and women also wore similar buckles on their belts and shoes. Whereas before they had been occupied with preparations, now they were busy with the serving.

There seemed to be no end to the heaping mounds of mashed potatoes, melted butter puddled at the top and running down the sides, the fragrant succession of casserole dishes with alternating rows of mock chicken and stuffing, the corn, peas, cranberry jelly and sauce, home-baked, warm, whole wheat rolls, and fresh apple cider.

Everyone was happy; smiles and cheerful conversation abounded, the sounds of talking mixing with those of cup, plate, silverware, and serving dishes as they were put to their intended uses. We talked and ate until the fulness of our stomachs matched the thankfulness of our hearts. And just when we thought there was no hope of holding any more, the servers would arrive with thick slices of pumpkin pie, each one garnished with real whipped cream. Our capacities expanded to match the challenge, and our thankfulness increased accordingly.

As the last sounds of the meal died down and even the talking subsided as a necessary accommodation in light of the expansion of the gastric regions, the program would begin. As near as I can recall, most everyone stopped for the program. Those who had been serving and working in the kitchen joining the rest of the people and quietly

accomplished their dining while the program progressed.

I confess that I don't remember much of the program part. Perhaps it was my youthfulness; perhaps it was the contented haze that descends when one has completed such a gastronomic task. However, there is one component that stands out in my mind as being inseparable from this event and the pleasantness of the evening.

My dad's cousin, Hollis Kennedy, dressed in his Pilgrim outfit, would sing, in his clear tenor voice, Bless This House. It seemed as essential and appropriate, even to a boy, as anything that had happened to that point. And it seemed, somehow, to be the musical equivalent of a capstone - the finishing touch without which the evening would have been incomplete.

Finally, when the program was finished and we were once again able to begin to move, the lights were brought up and we set busily about the task of cleaning up and putting away. Everyone lent a hand and the work was completed in short order, sped along by a sense of return for the blessings received and perhaps some puritanical twinge of guilt at having eaten so much and the hope of at least partly redeeming oneself through activity.

Soon all was concluded; the kitchen was clean, the floor was swept; everything was lugged out to the cars. Nothing remained but to head for home, the ride to which, in the dark, frosty cool of the late evening, was filled with quiet, contented, reminiscences of the evening just past.

Today I sit in my home a continent away on the outer edge of Los Angeles, clad in my L.L Bean slippers, sweatshirt, and jeans, reminders of a generous yet thrifty mother who, each birthday and Christmas reaches into her larder of employee-store purchases and keeps me dressed in the manner to which I'm accustomed. The sky is gray; the air is cool. One could imagine that the light coming in the window and over my shoulder is that of home. I sat down to complete the bulletin for this Sabbath, but a story came out instead. I'll return now to the work that awaits me and that I didn't really have time to interrupt, but it will be with a thankful heart and peacefulness of soul for the blessings of memory that are mine.