

Danville News Column  
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"Home for Thanksgiving"  
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It helps to understand how an Andrews' family Thanksgiving always has been more Marx Brothers movie than Norman Rockwell illustration.

But not this year.

Imagine Grandma in the corner quivering from her Parkinson's and us asking her to mix our drinks. See the table snaking out from dining room into living room into foyer as new ones arrive for a place at the table, whether by birth or matrimony. You only get promoted to the main table by someone's death or when someone is studying abroad. This lack of space is our own fault. We're breeders. Thanksgiving traditionally has involved feeding a galaxy of persons: grandmas, mom and dad, five siblings, their spouses, their spawn, their spawn's sundry girl-friends and boy-friends. Roommates and strays of various shapes and sizes always get absorbed. More fodder for teasing. Folding chairs line up beside kitchen chairs, wicker porch chairs, high chairs, and cherry wood dining room chairs. Silver goblets and jelly glasses mix among champagne glasses on the tablecloth.

Introducing new boyfriends becomes one of the family's favored and delicious moments. One such nervous boyfriend arrived for his family debut. As he walked toward the house, his future father-in-law called out, "Hey, do you remember what happened to the goat in Jurassic Park?"

Now picture Dad with rolled up sleeves attacking the two Ostrich size turkeys with carving hatchet and pitchfork.

One year we even enjoyed a car fire. Someone looked out the window and noticed a car in flames up the street. Evidently, the driver parked on top of a pile of leaves raked to the curb. Hot manifolds ignite dry leaves. We all rushed to the door and started laughing, until my sister suddenly shouted, "That's my car!" Well before the fire trucks arrived we gathered around the burning station-wagon, the wheels popping, and began chanting. We toyed with the idea of performing an annual sacrifice to the Thanksgiving gods.

But not this year.

One family tradition involves a stealthy, secret, seeking out to find where Grandma's fudge balls rolled in chocolate sprinkles have been hidden. It's hard to deny you've been raiding the platter with a mouthful of fudge. Only my sister has learnt to master making them, a ritual which requires invoking our grandmother's name while stirring the cauldron. Granny's ghost must be present to bless. Another tradition includes mom burning the crescent rolls.

Then, following the grand consumption, all the grand-daughters turn up the volume of the CD player and do the dishes by hand, dancing, swaying, singing. We are a sexist family, as the guys linger at the table, searching with fingertips for remnants of chocolate sprinkles, and get into sarcastic political arguments. Dad still would vote for Nixon.

We're a noisy bunch. Bear in mind that I'm the Harpo of the family – the quietest and least opinionated. The only time I get a chance to talk is when mom looks at me with her doe-like eyes and pleads with me to offer the blessing before we gorge ourselves insensate. It's tough being the professional prayer of the family. If I'm Harpo, my brothers really are Groucho and Chico: "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas; how he got into my pajamas, I don't know."

But not this year.

This year we're staying here for Thanksgiving. We're not even going to attempt the fudge balls. Grandma's ghost is restricted to New Jersey. I predict our day will be strangely calm and polite. How different. Even sadder, our newly married daughter can't afford another flight to the east coast. I'll miss her.

For you see, there is no homestead anymore to which we all, like salmon, instinctively return each Thanksgiving. The homestead is gone. It was razed last summer. Mom and Dad now live in a small apartment. None of us own a house adequate for the tribal gathering. Gone. And irreplaceable. Once 112 Helen Street was the sun around which our family orbited; we wandering planets and racing asteroids held together by its gravitational pull. Now 112 Helen Street is a hole in the ground. One brother remains in Rhode Island, me in Pennsylvania. One brother's daughter, with husband and three boys, takes her turn at hosting theirs. I'm guessing Mom and Dad will eat with one of the sisters' families. Or maybe tour to both, surely visit and enjoy those three great-grandsons.

I'll miss it. I'll miss them.

What holds a family together? It must be more than memories, more than traditions. Intention, perhaps?