

Facts and Fantasies

O Those Wedding Customs

By BARBARA MOYNEHAN

The origin of many wedding customs is enough to make any self respecting woman's libber change her mind about going through with the ceremony.

For one thing, most of the traditions stem from the early custom of capturing a wife, or as in the case of the ring finger, are the result of a humility tradition.

That the woman's left hand displays the matrimonial sign, is based on the assumption that the man is master, the right hand of the family. The right hand has always stood for power and authority, while the left expressed submission and serfdom.

This blow to women's ego is lessened a bit by the wedding tradition. As excavations and biblical records testify, rings had signets to provide a seal with which orders were signed. To hand such a ring to another person symbolized and actually carried out, a transfer of authority.

So, to hand one's wife the signet ring implied that she had come to share responsibility as an equal partner in the management of the home. Its circular shape symbolized the lasting character of the contract.

The leap year proposal is one definitely redeeming tradition, and should be especially interesting since this is leap year!

Celibacy among priests and nuns was not always the rule, which makes this otherwise outrageous myth a little more believable. St. Patrick, committed to celibacy, was approached by St. Bridget, whose convent was in revolt over the injustice of the institutions which gave only men the right to propose and barred women from taking the initiative in selecting a mate.

Patrick was very sympathetic, but also prided himself for being a realistic man, so he informed Bridget that total equality was out of the question. However, he did suggest that they should be permitted to propose during one full year in seven. Bridget was not satisfied, and decided to try a new technique. She threw her arms around Patrick, saying she dared not go back to the nuns with such a proposition. "Make it a year in four," she begged.

The future saint had rather enjoyed her embrace and promised that, for another, he would accede to her request. Moreover, he undertook to make it not only every fourth year, but the longest year at that—the leap year.

So the story goes.

Procedure at weddings follows definite rules. In the beginning, these were security arrangements, not etiquette.

Beyond the Stained Glass



"OUTDOOR WEDDING... COUNTRY..."

The groom always is on the right side of the bride, for the same reason there is a "best" man, to defend her from attack and capture by jealous rivals.

The groom always chose not only a good friend but the strongest, the best, to be near by during the ceremony. And the groom always stood to the right of the bride to keep his sword hand free.

The bride's veil is also a relic of the early custom of capturing a wife. It was thought only natural that the newly acquired "goods" be safely wrapped up before being taken away. Fear of rivals and jealous evil spirits also prompted the custom of veiling the bride's identity.

Brides-to-be, upon learning the tradition behind wedding cakes, may have second thoughts about incorporating even that into their big day.

It first appeared among the Romans, where cakes were used only at the nuptials of the upper class as part of a ceremony known as the "confarreatio," or "eating together."

First the bride and groom shared a small part of the cake, which was a sort of unleavened scone which was thought to secure for them a life of plenty in both children and happiness.

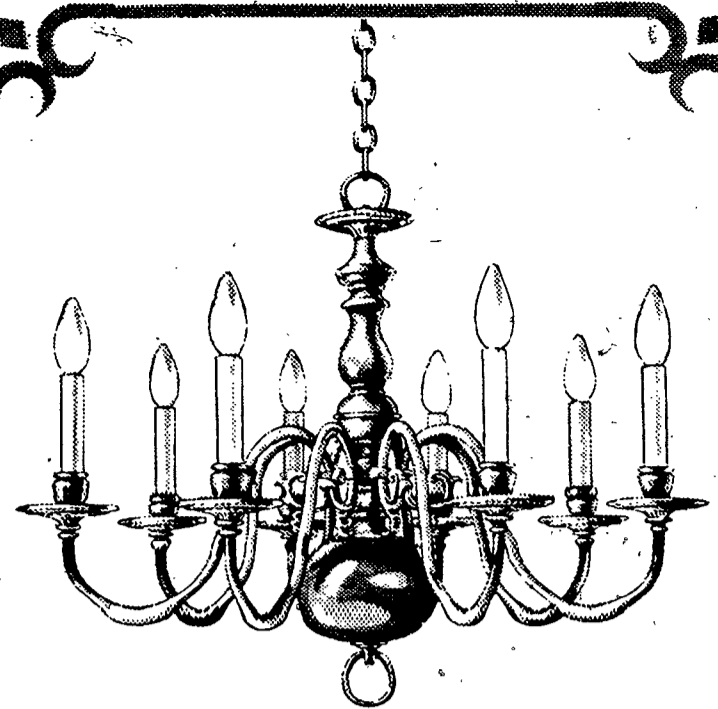
Then the cake was broken over the bride's head, and the guests scrambled for the fragments, believing that they too would share in the blessings these symbolized.

Enough of this levity, though it does seem that levity often is missing when marriage is the topic.

We speak of wedlock and imagine it means that marriage locks people up and chains them together like prisoners. Actually, the original "lock" was the Anglo-Saxon word for gift and "wed" the word for promise.

Wedlock thus pledged the finest of gifts, simply, the happiness of a man and a woman.

All the above facts and fantasies came from "How Did It Begin?" compiled by Rudolph Brasch.



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