

Celtic customs of special interest to area Belgians

Mrs. Ed (Josie) Wautlet, Algoma, was the speaker at a recent mother-daughter breakfast at Brussels. Her subject was "Belgians, Descendants of the Celts." The talk resulted in a request for copies. So that more area persons can share it, Mrs. Wautlet's talk is reproduced here much in its original form.

by JOSIE WAUTLET

Even today, in ancient Cornwall in the British Islands, a huge fire is lit at the changing of the seasons in spring. Bunches of herbs are thrown into the fire, and the ancient prayer is made to the Gods . . . May the good seeds prosper and grow, and may the bad seeds all perish in the fire. Then fires begin to flicker from other hilltops as other villages do the same. Soon many fires glow across the countryside.

Has this custom ever been observed in your lifetime? I can remember when I was a child some 60 years ago, that my father on the first Sunday in Lent always carried forkfuls of dry straw into the front yard and set them afire as soon as twilight came. Soon the neighbors too had their little fires going. I never knew the significance of this practice, but it did intrigue me even then. I knew that it seemed to have some religious significance, but the practice faded away very early in my life and I never really gave it much thought. Now I find that we are descendants of the ancient Celts who were the originators of the ritual.

The Celts or Kelts, both pronunciations are correct, lived in the land of King Arthur and Merlin the wizard. It is the land of the stone circles, celtic crosses and druids and sacred trees.

The Celts were a group of related tribes who lived in the most northern provinces of the British Islands including Ireland and Scotland. They gave rise to the first civilization north of the Alps about 800 years before Christ. The Celts were energetic and very inventive.

They were the first to use iron for tools and weapons. The Celts introduced soap to Greece and Rome. They invented chain armor such as the knights of old wore. They were the first to shoe horses and they made the first handsaws, chisels, files and other tools which we still use today. They forged iron into rims for their wheels and set the gauge for our railroad tracks, 4½' 8½". This was the span of their chariot wheels. (All of this information is from National Geographic Magazine.) They pioneered the iron plowshare, the rotary flourmill and a wheeled harvester 2,000 years before Cyrus McCormick.

The Celts were also called the Galli. Remember Paul's letter to the Galatians? They were Gauls also and lived in Asia Minor. The Greeks called the Celts Kiltioi, the Germans said Kelton, the Romans said Galli, and the French softened it to Celti. But this was later.

The Celts were known to be very fierce fighters. They rode horse drawn chariots into battle and carried spears and shields highly decorated with fanciful heads. Sometimes they fought naked, believing this gave them protection from

the deities while in battle. It also frightened the enemy when they greased their long hair and made it stand on end.

The women attained a very high place in their society, equal to the men. They retained the right to their own property even after marriage. Sometimes they fought beside their men in battle. They were vain, as the men also were. They painted their faces with berry juice and wore bracelets and silver brooches. The men wore long cloaks in vivid colors. They had hand mirrors such as we have today. The men wore trousers, which surprised the Romans who had never seen them.

The Celts crossed the English channel and spread and settled gradually over most of Europe, even going as far as Spain with tribes extending to northern Italy and East to the Balkan Mountains. It was about 400 years before Christ that the Celts invaded and populated Europe. It always baffles me as to why some people find it so difficult to believe the Biblical stories of Jesus Christ when we know and believe the stories of the Roman conquests, which happened in the same era of time.

The Roman Empire was spreading into far flung places when Christ was born. It was in the year 52 before Christ that the great battle by the Romans to take Belgium was fought. The deciding battle took place at Namur in that year. This was after seven years of fighting, from 58 to 52 B.C. After the Roman legions of Caesar had conquered a region it was necessary to leave soldiers and guards behind to protect their new conquests, and so it was in Belgium, too. The language of the Romans was Latin of course, and with time it became mixed with the Gaulic or Celtic language of the conquered. This became the Walloon language of the people of Wallonie. This continued for five centuries until the fall of the Roman empire in 476 A. D. and for us is still the language we call Walloon.

About the year 600, the Teutonic Franks who lived to the East of Wallonie tried to take over that area. They were able to conquer the northern area of Belgium which was flat and difficult to defend. Here they were able to exterminate the Gallic tribes, and so Frankish became the language there. This is the language we call Flemish. According to the book "Chateau Gerard" by Harry Holbert Turney High then the Flemings are not descended from the Belgae. So obviously, the Flemish, fine people though they be, are only politically and legally Belgians, but not in the sense of Caesar. The bulk of the fathers of the Walloons by contrast, were men who saw Caesar and whom the conquerer called Belgae and whose areas are as specifically Belgae as the modern Welsh are Caesar's Britons. To be more specific, these people are descended from the Belgic tribe who are mentioned in the Gallic Wars.

The Walloons call themselves Wallon. This wall syllable suggests Wales or Welsh, indeed educated Walloons often refer to

themselves as Welsh to Americans. This Celtic "W" became a "G" in later French, so Wall is an earlier form of Gall which is easily recognized as Gaul. As Caesar said, "They are called 'celti' in their own language and 'Gauli' in ours." The Walloons then are basically Celtic Belgae mixed with Roman colonists, with some German infusion.

In the southwest area, the Franks conquered but were unable to exterminate the Gauls, so that area which is France today developed their language which is a mixture of Latin with Gaulic and Frankish.

The Franks were unable to conquer the central more easily defended part of Belgae or Wallonie. This part retained its Gallo Roman language mostly as it was. This is the Walloon we still have today.

French and Walloon is no doubt caught up in the same phonetic drifts. Walloon is no broken down French, but in its classic form it is just as old and valid a dialect as the court language of French kings, almost always being as close to the basic Latin, and often closer.

In Belgium there are actually five main dialects. There is West Walloon, Central Walloon and East Walloon and then there is Picard which is spoken in the extreme northwestern section of Belgium. It is like the French spoken in Picardy in France. Also, the extreme lower part of central Walloon has another patois. It is called Gamais and is the same as the French of Rheims. The national language for all legal matters and government work is French, however. But it is interesting to note that each area is interested in preserving their parental language. They are a proud people and do not like to mix with others of different backgrounds, so perhaps this goes back to their having been overrun by neighboring countries so many times in their past. Belgium has never in all its history declared war on any nation, and yet she has frequently had to fight to survive.

Another area that interested me was their magico religious beliefs. Many of these still linger in disguised form but some of them become a little obvious after a little thought. I remember when I was a child and someone made a face at another, we would say, "If the bell would ring when you are doing that, your face would stay like that forever." I ran across this same idea in the book about the village of Chateau Gerard. There, they said if the bells of St. Hubert would ring . . . St. Hubert was a Belgian saint, patron of hunters, always pictured with his hunting dogs which are the ancestors of the American bloodhounds of today.

I remember, too, that if you got up in a bad mood someone would jest, "You must have forgotten to look at your belly button." Well, to my surprise, there it was. It was considered that you would surely have a quarrel if you forgot that little morning oblation.

If you saw a spider in the morning, you could expect bad news before the day was over. But if you saw a hump back

person and he passed you on the left that meant good luck. If you broke a dish, you were in for bad news. We were never allowed to sing or hum at the table either, and now I know why. It was surely a signal for bad news.

The moon signs were very important to these people, too. They believed that any project started under a new moon would progress, and persons born during the first quarter would be strong and active and crops planted at that time would grow fast. Some people today still watch the moon for planting signs. Does the moon really have an effect on the growth of plants? Who am I to say?

A sneeze before breakfast meant good news and you would have a visitor if you saw a white horse. My dear old mother always expected company if two forks or knives were set at one place at the table.

The book states that it was believed that those born Good Friday would have power to heal through blessing. In my lifetime, I remember certain people who were said to have this power—and some people went to them especially for such things as toothache. My family didn't do this, however. I was surprised to read that for sprains they advised soaking in a mixture of manure and water. Ugh!!! Perhaps the smell anesthetized the pain.

Some signs we watched for were also mentioned as ancient and of Celtic origins. For instance if the chickens ran into the hen house when it started to rain, you knew that the rain would last, but if they stayed outside, you knew it would only be a short shower.

If the sunset is red, my old father still says it will be windy on the morrow. And Grandfather sometimes remarked that it would rain because he had seen the "arbe de abram." He regarded the shapes of clouds as they came over the horizon. If they branched out in treelike fashion, that was the "Tree of Abraham." I don't know where all these signs and signals originated, but I know that some of the older people in my childhood days were quite superstitious. Even Halloween with its witches and goblins are a call back to those ancient days. Some of the customs change a little, but the folklore seems to live on to a degree.

The ancient Celts believed that certain trees were sacred. For some it was the ancient oaks and for others it was the old Linden trees. They believed that Druids lived in trees and that there were other little fairylike people and dwarfs that lived in the forests. I suppose that is where the old tales of witches and goblins and fairies and brownies came from. They believed in four leaf clovers for good luck, and that a ringing in your right ear meant that someone was talking about you but saying nice things. If, however, it was the left ear, then it was unfriendly gossip.

If snow fell on mud it meant frost within three days, and if it rained in a newly dug grave there would be another death shortly.

Enough of such tales, but I bet it brought many others to mind in the memories of those who read this. It would be interesting to compile a list of them.