

GROUNDHOG DAY, FOREVER

*Wenn der Hahn kräht auf dem Mist,
ändert sich das Wetter oder bleibt's wie's ist.*

What do you know of the second day in February? We shall ride this day like a pitch-black mare, chase through holy woods and cobblestone side streets, past small print on old-times' paper, along the psyche's shards that – somehow, somewhere, somewhat – form a puzzle picture, look.

February 2 marks the exact midpoint between winter solstice and vernal equinox, it's a day – and also its night – celebrated long before "February" even existed on a calendar.

The Celts called it *Imbolc*. Judging by the positioning of some megaliths, the date was revered as begin of spring, so archeologist literature. Common thinking has it that the ancients prayed for the return of the sun, and that may be true, although we like to consider the worship less a pleading than a celebration. We're all part of this wonderfully rotating universe, aren't we, with our flaming torches held high.

Come pagan times a fertility goddess – who would later evolve into Saint Brighid – made the day her own. Bregenz, Brigantia and Braganca are Italian cities named in her honor, situated at a latitude where spring is possible as early as February 2. Some regions held onto the tradition to erect a tall wooden pole on February 2, a "Colman."

On the Internet you'll find numerous events scheduled for *Imbolc*, a renewal of Wiccan and Pagan rites.

The church made a holiday of February 2, too, calling it *Lichtmess* (literally: "Light-mas") in Bavaria. According to Gabi Grau, of Munich, catholic *Mariä Lichtmess* rites reach back to Jewish ritual that required a new mother to submit to a cleansing ceremony 40 days after giving birth to a male child (80 days in the case of female child).

"After birthing, a woman was considered unclean. For the cleansing the woman's family had to offer the priest a purification sacrifice, a sheep and a pigeon was the tradition. The cleansing happened with water that had been blessed. The Jewish temple cult also had a ceremony for the sanctification of the first-born. He was given to the priest as property of god. Then the child was bought back with money. If the family was in financial difficulties, it sufficed to give the priest turtledoves."

Grau notes that *Mariä Lichtmess* was a major state holiday in Bavaria until the early 1900s. Today this 40th day after Christmas is still honored by catholics, the rites' highlight a candlelit procession. First though the focus is on the women who'd born a child between Christmas and *Lichtmess* that year. "They undergo a purifying ceremony in which the priest sprinkles them with holy water; the other women dip their hands in the holy water and touch their face."

As a young girl in the 1960s, Grau participated in *Mariä Lichtmess* ceremonies in a village church near Munich. "The exact customs vary from village to village. The girls wear white. When the weather is stormy the procession takes place inside the church. I remember the event as uncomfortable – what I saw as 'the old women' at the time were always talking among themselves, excluding us girls. But to carry the big candle in the procession, that was always exhilarating."

A blessing of candles also was part of church ceremonies in some regions, hence the English name for February 2, Candlemas. Folks brought their household candles to church for this blessing, including the black candles that were lit for protection during thunderstorms.

In Mexico, Candlemas – *Dia de la Candelaria* – is the official closure to the holiday season, says Andrea Hernandez, secretary at St Rose of Lima Parish, Ephrata, Washington state. "After the family gathering it's time to take down all the Christmas decor. It's also 'payback day' for those who'd found a figure in their portion of the Day-of-Kings (January 6) cake; this person is obligated to host a party of *atole* – hot chocolate – and tamales for family and friends."

Hernandez notes that this custom points to a blending of European Christian and pre-Columbian influences: "Tamales were used as offerings to the god of water, *Tláloc*, to ensure abundant rains for a plentiful harvest."

Catholic traditions of Mexican Candlemas include "the Rising of the Baby Jesus," Hernandez says. "People carry images and figures of baby Jesus to be blessed at the church.

"An important custom is for families to own an image of the Christ child, a *Niño Dios*. At times a godparent is chosen for the *Niño Dios*, who is then responsible for hosting various celebrations between Christmas and Candlemas. First, on Christmas Eve the *Niño Dios* is placed in the Nativity scene; on January 6, Kings' Day, the Christ child is brought presents from the Magi; and on Candlemas the icon is dressed in fine clothes and presented in the church."

In Germany's protestant churches Candlemas is "a very small holiday," says Karlheinz Klose, retired pastor of Heilsbronn, Franconia. "In some communities

it's a *Lichtmess* custom to leave the Christmas tree up until that day." Referring to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter Two, Klose says that it's common practice for a preacher to touch on *Lichtmess*, "as part of the liturgist reading." But that would be on a Sunday that falls close to February 2, protestants do not hold special church services on *Lichtmess* if it's a weekday, he remarks.

Historically, it was not the Reformation that toned down Candlemas and similar catholic observances, including the kneeling before the altar, Klose explains. "Luther was a monk, so there was much continuity of catholic observances. For protestants the change came with the Age of Reason, (in Germany) with Lessing and Kant." Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and other thinkers in the Age of Reason held that "man should stand erect before god," Klose says.

The Age of Reason also produced an agriculturally religious twist. Noting that he studied sermons that were preached "in the spirit of the Age of Reason," Klose says that education in new, more efficient farming systems was presented from the pulpit in biblical parables.

Meanwhile, for the *Knechte* – the steady-hand farmworkers of yesteryear's Germany, and also the servants of aristocrats – *Lichtmess* was of great significance that continued up to modern day, Klose emphasizes: it was the traditional day for them to get paid. Not only did farmer and farmworker settle up, but they also renewed their employer-employee relationship at this time, or, they parted ways in which case the *Knecht* found a job at another farm on this day. The work agreement for the upcoming farming season was usually not too formal, the *Knecht* often a relative of the farmer, younger brother, cousin, nephew.

What happens when you give *Knechte* handfuls of coins? They itch to spend the money, don't they. To oblige, the towns held markets on the occasion, *Lichtmessmärkte* specifically of items a *Knecht* needs such as work clothes, boots, kitchenware for the bunkhouse, knives and such.

And after the market, a frolic of beer quaffing? Probably so, because until St Agathe Day February 5 it was customary to give the *Knecht* time off.

In some towns the *Lichtmessmarkt* is held to this day. We travel to Altdorf in the Nürnberger Land where about 60 booths line up in the town square. The sky's cold, drab, yet visitors wander among the stalls in a steady flow. The vendors stand bundled-up, stomping their feet.

The wares: household stuff, various assortments of brushes and furniture polish; women's wear, work wear, shawls and hats, military surplus; boot grease; light

bulbs; portmanteaus. Two stands shine with small polished stones – worry stones?, good luck rocks? One of the lapidary vendors entices customers with a wheel of Fortune, for one Euro you get to spin the wheel which stops on A, B, or C, entitling you to choose from the corresponding stone display – every spin a winner!

The rockhound stalls and three other crafts booths make for a mini-fair. One stand offers a wide variety of handmade clothing and wall hangings fashioned from pelts. Another does good business with name tag stamps; the young woman cuts the names from thin, soft wood with an electric bandsaw, at amazing speed which is what draws the crowd in the first place, they come to watch her work, then think of someone who could use their name on a stamp...

And, the booth hard to miss due to its happy glitter, a spread of spin-in-the-wind garden ornaments crafted from high-grade stainless steel beckons: *Zauberstahl*, “Magic Steel.” They craft the spinners in nearby Schwabach, say Thomas and Susan Adam. They started their company nine years ago; now they have a line of 200 designs which they manufacture together with two employees. The *Lichtmessmarkt* at Altdorf is small exposure for their business; in the main they sell at garden shows during the warmer months.

How's the weather been on Candlemas these past nine years? It seems to be a day of markedly varied sky, from one extreme to the other they've experienced it all at Altdorf, the Adams say.

As at virtually all open-air events in Germany, hot-sausage aromas drift across the square so that you can follow your nose to *Bratwurst*. There is also a stand where fish's on the grill. And a cheese-maker is busy wrapping portions cut from big rounds.

The stately patrician houses that line the square, and the old stone church with high spire, and the tower arches of the town wall entrances all contribute to a scene which wouldn't have looked all that different back when *Knechte* came here on *Lichtmess*, arriving from area villages. Sure, the craftsmen's booths would have been more rustic with thatch, and maybe hawking the wares would have been louder, more boisterous. Certainly horses would be waiting on the cobblestone side streets, instead of Volkswagens. But the *Gasthäuser* – the taverns – at the square would have been the place to warm up with a meal and a *Stein* of beer just as today.

There farmers as well as their *Knechte* would surely talk of weather. For us, *Lichtmess* weather is the connector to America's *Lichtmess* incarnation, the Groundhog Day. The Groundhog Day does wonders for the eccentric promotion of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania where the prognosticatory groundhog is named

Phil since 1887. Which seems quite the leap, doesn't it, from Celtic torch columns in hallowed tree stand in the night, and white-dressed girls in cathedral with candles, to the jamboree-atmosphere contrived to amplify groundhog behavior, all in good humor, of course, the media faithfully reporting it across the nation year after year: America's most famous shadow. Or a non-shadow, in which case we won't suffer another six weeks of winter.

Groundhog day was arrived at by German *Bauernregeln*, "Farmer Rules" of weather prognostication. The animal species whose shadow was pronounced predictive on February 2 varied by region, either bear or badger or hedgehog was imbued with forecasting powers. In the region from where the Pennsylvania Dutch emigrated, the hedgehog had the honor, which was inopportune since America is hedgehogless. The first Pennsylvania Dutch looked about and replaced the hedgehog in their *Bauernregel* with someone local who resembled the cute creature, namely the alfalfa-loving *Marmota monax*. Other names for the groundhog are woodchuck, whistle-pig, land-beaver, *Murmeltier*.

In this age of Weather Channel broadcasting continuous satellite images, why does the fascination with *Bauernregeln* persist? Here are some of those *Bauernregeln* as they appear on a German calendar 2014, couched in rhyme as is their wont:

*Braut der Januar Nebel gar
wird das Frühjahr nass fürwahr.*

"When January brews fog / it'll be a wet spring forthwith."

*Wenn's der Februar gnädig macht,
bringt der Lenz den Frost bei Nacht.*

"When February shows mercy / Lent (the six weeks before Easter) will bring night frost."

*Taut es im März nach Sommerart,
kriegt er noch einen weißen Bart.*

"When the March thaw is summer-like / it'll grow a white beard yet."

*Ist der April auch noch so gut,
der Bauer bleibt auf der Hut.*

"No matter how good April weather / the farmer's only cautiously optimistic."

Viel Gewitter im Mai,

singt der Bauer Juchhei.

“When many thunderstorms come in May / the farmer shouts: Yippee!”

*Juni trocken mehr als nass,
füllt mit guten Wein das Fass.*

“When June’s more dry than wet / the barrel fills with fine wine.”

*So golden die Sonne im Juli strahlt,
so golden sich der Roggen mahlt.*

“When the sun shines golden in July / so a golden color mills the rye.”

*Leuchten vor Mariä Himmelfahrt die Sterne /
so hält sich das Wetter gerne.*

“When before the Assumption-of-the-Virgin-Mary Day (August 15) the stars shine bright / the weather stays nice.”

*Wenn noch Donner den September weckt /
wird der Winter schneebedeckt.*

“When thunder wakes September still / a snowy winter will follow.”

*Im Oktober Sturm und Wind,
uns den frühen Winter künd'.*

“When October’s stormy and windy / it foretells an early winter.”

*Bringt der November Morgenrot,
der Aussaat dann viel Schaden droht.*

“When November brings red in the morning / the recently seeded fields are threatened with much damage.”

*Regnet's an Sankt Nikolaus,
wird der Winter streng und graus.*

“When it rains on Saint Nicholas Day (December 6) / the winter will be stern and cruel.”

So, what do you think? Are these *Bauernregeln* quirky? Then how about farming by astronomy, isn’t that also, umm, whimsical?

Maybe so, maybe not: Farmer's Almanac sales every year would indicate much interest in, and adherence to, star-guided gardening. In fact, as a publishing phenomenon Harris' Farmer's Almanac claims a large readership who doesn't find it odd.

Or maybe it's exactly the oddities that lure, odd items one accent of the 146-page compilation in 2014, "the second year after the bissextile" (leap year): articles report on orchid gardening in a limestone cavern; Gregor Mendel's plant genetic research papers getting burned by the abbot who succeeded him; Weeds to Welcome; building a straw man; Gardening with Cardboard; mixing goober peas (peanuts) with Coca-Cola.

Yep, the Farmer's Almanac is rural nostalgia in your hands, the format of the publication makes only small concessions to 21st-century glitz, the old-time typeface and lay-out remain, the black-and-white on oldie paper transfers wistfulness to your fingers – if there be an antithesis to the Internet Website concept, the Farmer's Almanac is it.

Let's face it, chances are tiny that the Farmer's Almanac rests comfortably in a modern farm office next to computer, even though the cover proclaims: "For Farmers, Planters, Merchants, Laborers and Gentle Country Folk." But that's just a nod to yesteryear, the Farmer's Almanac of today clearly caters to green thumbs who enjoy dirt and plants as expressions of the cosmos. From Aries to Pisces the Zodiac is an everyday presence in the calendar pages, as are characters and aspects of the planets, from Saturn to Pluto. On February 2, 2014, the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, for example, Jupiter is at its meridian at 10 p.m., the moon sign is Pisces, the moon's southing 2:43. In appropriate climate zones, this February 2 is best suited for planting above-ground crops, especially annual flowers.

The calendar days carry an entry defining which gardening activity will be in sync with the heavens at the time. February 3: "Build raised beds." February 4: "Clean out tool shed." February 5: "Firm down soil lifted by frost." February 6: "Decide which herbs to plant." February 7: "Be sure birds have water to drink."

And so on.

About the month February we find out that its Latin origin is "to smoke" since the Romans assigned February to purification.

If there are cultic tones, the Farmer's Almanac bridges olden wisdom and the science of biology and the art of aesthetics with well-written features about chef's gardens, landscape architects, pest facts, plant taxonomy. There are dozens of

recipes, a table for “companion planting,” precise advice on food and flower preservation.

In keeping with trends the 2014 Farmer’s Almanac deliberately focuses on “new found interest in other cuisines,” and on “...organic gardening ...favored by most of us.”

It’d be interesting to know what percentage of Farmer’s Almanac readers actually consult the calendar daily and act upon the specific gardening advice. And how many readers simply favor the feel of the booklet, enjoy the sense of acknowledgement that for millennia farmers have related crop growth and weather pattern to lunar and planetary movement. Perhaps, for some, the Farmer’s Almanac is a sort of talisman, a gardener’s rabbit’s-foot.

We can only guess.

What’s certain, however, is that for every *Bauernregel* there exists a joker’s *Witz*, such as the one we left hanging at the start of this writing:

*Wenn der Hahn kräht auf dem Mist,
ändert sich das Wetter oder bleibt's wie's ist.*

“When the rooster crows atop the manure heap / the weather’s sure to change or it stays exactly the same.”

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