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Derby Day

Celebrations are considered by most people as a time to enjoy food and spirits, to socialize, and to break out of the mundaneness of every day life. A Folkloreist might see other things in a celebration. The following is an example of regional and occupational folklore that are part of a seasonal celebration.

To Kentuckians, the first Saturday of every May means its time to break out their white shoes, their straw hats, and head to Churchill Downs to place a bet on their Kentucky Derby favorite.

To certain residents of Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park, the first Saturday in May means its time to eat light, put on your new clothes, and head to the Davis residence for some truly Southern Derby celebrating.

For the last five years my father has put on a Derby celebration that surely equals the one put on by Kentucky's Governor or the Churchill Downs Jockey Club. Well, it may not be that major, but its the best Derby party in Wyoming and Montana.

The party preparation starts weeks in advance. A country ham is ordered from Harper's in Clinton, Ky., mint is ordered from California, Martha White flour and cornmeal are sent to Yellowstone by my grandmother, and invitations are sent.

Invitations are sent to a select few in the community. The only thing that unifies the guests are their business dealings with my father. These men don't often see eye to eye, but on Derby day there is no shop talk and the atmosphere is friendly.

The week before the party, my family starts preparing the food. The buffet will include biscuits, cornbread, rolls, bar-b-que pork, country ham, black-eyed peas, cheese and grits, cass~~er~~ole, fresh vegetable trays with dip, roasted sugar pecans, fresh tomatoes, pecan pie and Derby pie.

There is sun made tea with mint, Southern Comfort punch, and Mint Jul~~e~~ps to drink. It should be noted that the strong Jul~~e~~ps are served in the same glasses that they are being served in at Churchill Downs. The set is sent to my father each year by a man who once lived in Mammoth. The Jul~~e~~ps are made with Maker's Mark, the bourbon my father considers Kentucky's finest. A case of it is sent to my father each year by a man who attends the party.

The guests arrive at one, the Derby is run approximately 3:30 pm. Even though the guests all live within walking distance they arrive in a chauffeured limousine.

After everyone arrives and drinks have been served, the guests are turned loose on the Southern buffet. The guests are not familiar with this type of food, and even though it is rather simple, they go back for seconds and thirds. There are also lots of compliments to the cooks.

During this time the women compare outfits. As in Louisville, the women here try to out-do each other. The party is truly an upscale event, just short of tuxes and evening gowns.

The next order of the day is to view the running of the Florida Derby and the Wood Memorial, two of the races that decide the Derby field. These races are VCR recorded because they are run several days before the Derby. This is also the first appearance of the pots.

The pots contain the name of each horse in the race. A set amount of money is placed in the pot and a name is drawn. It's winner take all, and the names are drawn before the race to add excitement. There is a pot for win, place, and show. The Florida Derby and Wood Memorial pots are for a dollar, The Derby pots range ~~range~~ from a ~~series~~ of dollar pots to five, ten and twenty dollar pots. There is also a fifty dollar win pot and a five dollar pot for the last place horse.

Next the pre-Derby show is viewed. It is ~~also during~~ this time that the pots are drawn and the words to "My Old Kentucky Home" are passed out. At the call to post everyone stands. My ~~mother~~, my sister, and I stand arm in arm. Everyone sings; the three of us always cry as we sing.

Now is the time we've been waiting for. Its time for the fastest three minutes in sports. The room is electric as every one prepares for the horses to burst out of the gates. When the announcer says, "And they're Off", the room is filled with noise ^{and} excitement as people yell out the name of their horse. The race is over as fast as it began. The winners collect their pot money and the floor is littered with losing tickets.

The guests socialize for a while longer, but soon everyone drifts home. The last prize is handed out just before everyone leaves. There is always one person who doesn't win any pots. So there are no hard feelings, my father always gives them a fifth of Maker's Mark and a Julep glass.

To my family this is a special day. On this day we reaffirm our roots, we show with more pride than usual that we are Kentuckians.

To us, Kentucky is a symbol of the past and future. The tears merge the past and ~~future~~ into the ~~present~~. The food is also a way to reaffirm our roots. We all grew up with that food, we love it, and we like to share it with others. By the way, my mother doesn't give out any recipes.

The Derby party is also a celebration of surviving the winter. In Yellowstone, the first part of May is the last of the snow until September. We don't count that little flurry every Fourth of July as snow. All the snow will soon melt and the summer season and all the tourists will soon over-run the Park.

Derby day is also a day for Dad to get to know the men he deals with at work in a different atmosphere. This may allow them to work together better. This also allows our family time to know these men and their families.