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Home is where the harvest is

By Maggi Smith-Dalton/Naumkeag Notations

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SALEM - "Thanksgiving Day in the times of which I write was a much more important festival than at present, and was universally kept as a season of family reunions....

One picture of that time has entirely passed away from Salem. For the week before Thanksgiving the farmers used to come in from the country, with carts full of poultry, or loads of wood drawn by mild melancholy eyed oxen, and stand round the market place, and up each side of Essex Street from Central to Washington Street, waiting for customers, who were not wanting There is no place today in busy crowded Essex Street for those patient farmers and their carts. Life is perhaps easier now, but it is not half so picturesque."

— Caroline Howard King, "When I Lived in Salem: 1822-1866"

"Crowned with the ears of corn, now come,

And to the pipe sing Harvest-Home."

— From Robert Herrick, "The Hock-Cart, or Harvest-Home"

The very act of "harvesting" is the heart-song of civilization. Without the harvest, could the concept of "home" be understood?

Home is where the harvest is

The development of agriculture and the cultivation of grains and cereals approximately 10,000 years ago is considered by scholars to be the seminal event in human history.

Planting, growth, and harvesting cradled civilization with the first cultivated patches of einkorn wheat, emmer wheat and barley.

Agriculture led to settled community, to extended and symbiotic

relationships with the land; to the development of cultural traditions, economic systems; to communication and public memory.

Symbols, rituals and celebrations connected to the natural cycles of an agricultural year are deeply rooted in the human psyche, and the permutations of such symbols and rituals are keys to understanding the "deep history" of humankind.

Harvest time is laden with more than practical significance, and is usually accompanied by appropriate observances of its spiritual dimension — and the importance of "home."

Sowing, then reaping — bringing the harvest fruits to storage and kitchen, to family and table —celebrates the very idea of having a home to call one's own.

Harvest as human life

In the natural cycle, humans saw mirrors to the cycle of human life: Conception/birth; growth; maturity.

The spirit of the cycle was characterized as female; the natural year corresponded to the stages of a woman's life (Maiden, Mother, Crone).

The archetypal female is found in all cultures; most often in triadic form or variant thereof In Western lore, the name of the Great Goddess Ceres (Greek: Kore), so long ago mingled in identification with Demeter (Mother Earth) as to be inseparable from that deity, was invoked as the source of all food, ruler of grains, mother of the harvest. Her symbol is a sickle-shaped lunar crescent, combined with a seed-seeking inverted cross.

From the ancient name "Ceres" we get the word "cereal." Cereals were among the earliest domesticated plants. According to tradition the spirit of Ceres/Demeter is present in the very last sheaf of harvest, forever before the reaper's eyes. Mindfulness of the power of the Spirit was thus reinforced, as it was by other periodic rituals since the first springtime furrow was plowed or seed-circle gently made in soft earth.

Harvest rituals usually incorporate honor and gratitude to the Giver of all Food.

Harvest Home

Harvest is of such importance to human life that the word "haerfest" ("to harvest") came to stand for the entire season of autumn. It was traditionally

celebrated in August until the nineteenth century; increased agricultural productivity lengthened the season so that it began sometime in July and ended in September.

Anglo-Saxons named September "Holy Month," perhaps underlining the importance of the harvest. The great day when the last wagonload of harvested grain is brought in is called, in ancient English rural tradition, "Harvest Home."

Harvest Home is rich with symbolism, ceremony and rejoicing; filled with song and merriment. The Oxford English Dictionary lists, as one of its very definitions, "a shout or song of rejoicing" on this last day of the ... harvest. If ever a celebration was song-soaked, it is this one.

"Lo here we come a reaping, a reaping, To reap our harvest fruit!

And thus we pass the year so long, And never be we mute"

— Peele, *Old Wive's Tale*, 1571

In common with other momentous natural turning points of the year, at Harvest Home inequality among people is mitigated or abrogated (by custom, if not by law). Friendliness, hospitality and freedom of interchange is the rule. "Harvest Home" is synonymous with an open heart — abundance applies to all aspects of behavior.

At Harvest Home, though local customs differed somewhat, and variants existed from country to country, celebration included honoring the "Com Mother" present in the last sheaf.

The sheaf was sometimes reaped in silence; more often, the act was accompanied by various ritualized shouts and cries. Specific names of entities were not used; the Spirit of nature and life was honored, not a deity.

In some lands, the sheaf was left unformed, and was either very large and heavy or made heavier by stones, etc., and called the "Great Mother" or the "Old Woman."

Some reapers bound it with ribbons. Sometimes the sheaf was ritually drenched by buckets of water by the reapers and gathered community while carried in from the field.

Commonly, a doll was fashioned from the sheaf (the "Corn Doll," "Kern Baby" or "Harvest Doll"). Were I to sketch it for you, you would see a doll woven of grain-stalks and grainheads in the shape of a woman wearing a

dress, perhaps with plaited "hair" made of stalks and grain-heads. Flowers could be added as adornment. The doll was often dressed in clothing. Thus the food-providing Spirit was embodied in both human form and in the grain.

It is important to understand this custom as symbolic, not literal. The doll was fashioned for mindfulness, not worship. Its secular function was also strong: For the corn doll/last sheaf ceremony symbolized — tangibly — that the end of harvest labors had come and enjoying the fruits of those labors lay ahead.

What was done with the doll after Harvest Home varied: sometimes, it was given a place of honor in the house and later fed to the cattle (to help them thrive) or plowed back into the earth at next planting. In this way, mindfulness of returning spring, the re-turning wheel of the seasons, was maintained.

A harvest queen was named, and a harvest lord — largely, honorific posts. A hock-cart or harvest wagon was decorated with green boughs, ribbons, and flowers, and heaped high with reaped grain; on top of this rode women, children, and the harvest lord. Singing always accompanied this stage of the festival.

"We have plowed, we have sowed,
We have reaped, we have mowed,
We have brought home every load,
Hip, Hip, Hip, Harvest Home!"

The harvest supper would follow in kitchens or in decorated barns; harvest supper songs were sung, and drinking (accompanied by toasts), dancing, and games enjoyed. From this custom, modern harvest festivals have evolved.

"Come boys, come; come boys, come,
And merrily roar out Harvest Home!
Harvest Home, Harvest Home,
We'll merrily roar out Harvest Home!"

There always has been music in harvest abundance. The rhythm of reaping — the swish of the sickle or scythe through the air — are musical in themselves, and naturally lead the human ear and voice to song, just as the

hauling of ropes, and heaving of anchor at sea inspires rhythmic chanteys. Joy in the heart at securing provisions for winter also makes harvesting a singing time and lightens the labors of the field.

Without the harvest, can there be home? Mindfulness of the earth's beauty and bounty makes human life a glorious journey, and bequeaths homes with joyful warmth as kernel and core.

Mindfulness of harvest traditions links us to deep human history.

Home itself is a harvest of all good things, past and present, and all those lovely moments in life which promise eternal returning springs.

Author's note: Outside America, "corn" refers to edible grains in general, usually excepting rice (wheat, barley, oats, rye).

The word "corn" comes from Middle English/Old English (for grain); Old Teutonic: kurnom; Old Saxon: korn; Old High German/Old Norse: korn (grain); Latin: granum. It also can refer to the seed of a cereal grass — ("kern" "kernel") — the core or central part.

What we have come to call "corn" in America is properly known as "maize" (*Zea mays*) — it is known elsewhere as "Indian Corn" — to designate its origin in America.

(Note: This essay has been excerpted from Jim and Maggi Dalton's new book, "The Measure of the Year: Singing Through the Seasons," copyright 2007 Singing String Music Publications, www.singingstring.org/publications, available in Salem at Cornerstone Books.)

Musicians and historians Maggi Smith-Dalton and husband Jim are specialists in 19th- and 20th- century music from parlor and stage. They have performed and taught American and Celtic music and history, in concert and by giving public history courses, nationwide.

They've shared their passion for both performance and historical/musicological research under the rubric "Understanding History Thru Music," for over two decades.

Jim and Maggi are preparing a book and a recording on music in Salem's history; are founders of the upcoming American History and Music Festival; and are founding members of the Salem History Society.

Maggi sings songs of joy all year round for the manifold blessings of her life — amongst them, you, Gentle Reader. Write Maggi@singingstring.org or visit the Web site www.singingstring.org.

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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

Previous audiences and sponsors have said:

"engaging, scholarly, delightful, warm, intelligent, flexible, humorous, talented, versatile, enthusiastic, personable, joyful ..."



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descriptions of our programs, classes,
and concerts ~

Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.