

I Know...I Was There

Autumn Leaves are the Beginning, Not the End

Those colorful heralds of fall signal work, play and beauty for all.

By Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

TO SOME PEOPLE, autumn is the bridge between summer and winter. To children, it's the start of a new school year. To people with the urge to travel, it's the time for planning trips to New England.

Bandleader Claude Thornhill popularized Autumn Nocturne, celebrating the season, and Nat "King" Cole's recording of Autumn Leaves starts with Johnny Mercer's lyrics "The falling leaves drift by the window, the autumn leaves of red and gold."

Ah, splendid autumn! Well, sort of. Alas, my home is in a heavily wooded area, and those falling leaves drifting down mean days of raking and bagging. How I yearn for the good old days when the air was perfumed with the scent of burning leaves, currently a minor felony in most places.

When I was growing up on a farm, September and October meant the endless drudgery of harvesting the corn crop. Every ear was removed from the stalk by hand and tossed into a wagon drawn by two extremely impatient horses. Husking corn was actually quite an art, so much so that national corn-picking contests, although perhaps not as thrilling as a NASCAR race, drew thousands of spectators.

But for ordinary mortals, it was tedious work. On an average-size farm, the job could take 2 months, given decent weather. My dad was pulled out of high school 3 years in a row to help his father with the harvest. That's why he—and many more farm boys—ended up

with just an eighth-grade education.

He saw to it that I dodged that fate, having me help pick corn only after school and on weekends.

Grandmother Stevens had a mattress stuffed with corn shucks in her guest bedroom. It was not only lumpy but also made strange rustling noises whenever you moved.

Motive Behind the Mattress?

And although there was never any solid evidence, as a kid I suspected it also was a condominium for mice.

Looking back, I suspect it was her way of assuring that guests wouldn't tarry too long in her home.

Autumn was the time to snug things down for the coming winter. Take down the screens. Wash and put up the storm windows. Put fresh straw in the chicken house toward the day when those free-ranging pullets would no longer range free and roost indoors instead of in the trees. Oh, and harvest the apples before the first frost hit.

My most vivid autumn memory is the historic Armistice Day storm of 1940. The morning dawned sunny and pleasant, but soon the temperature began to drop and the wind steadily picked up.

Weather forecasting wasn't up to today's standards, so there were no warnings on the radio.

Dad correctly guessed that a major storm was in the offing, so it was time to get cows, pigs and chickens into shelter, harvest and store apples in the basement and do a dozen other winterizing chores.

Soon, the winds hit 75 miles an hour and rain turned to snow. (Five ships sank on Lake Michigan that day, claiming 66 lives.)

Before our outdoor work was over that day, both Dad and I had frozen ears and even a couple frostbitten fingers.

Ya-hoo! Back to School!

But most autumns were lovely times. They held plenty of excitement for us youngsters.

There were new teachers to figure out, new books and clothes to buy and the football season to anticipate, culminating in the season-ending Big Game against the evil ones from Dixon.

Somewhere in there was the World Series (so long ago that the Chicago Cubs were actually contenders), Halloween and, every 4 years, the Presidential election. Even though the national conventions were held in the summer months, the campaign did not truly start until after Labor Day.

Remember those radio broadcasts when announcers breathlessly speculated on what deals were being made in smoke-filled rooms? And then the next ballot, when we'd hear "The great state of Alabama proudly casts 14 votes for its native son, Franklin P. Beauregard" ...or whomever.

Dad would sit by our Atwater Kent radio until the wee hours, muttering and fussing until the new candidates finally were decided upon. Rarely was he pleased with the parties' choices.

Another major autumn event was the introduction of the new model cars. Unlike today, the new ones actually looked different from last year's models. Showroom windows were covered with butcher paper until the much-ballyhooed New Model Day arrived.

If you were, say, a Plymouth man, the dealer would give you a sneak peek before the official unveiling.

In our part of Illinois, a favorite autumn outing was a drive along the

Rock River, as beautiful as any I've ever seen. The sumacs, maples and oaks show off their vivid autumn wardrobes, and a highlight along the scenic way is the statue of Black Hawk, The Eternal Indian, between the towns of Oregon and Byron. Standing on a high bluff across the river, it was created by sculptor Lorado Taft and stands almost 50 feet tall. Built of reinforced concrete, it was dedicated in 1911 and still stands sentinel to this day.

But whether it's the Great Smoky or the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Appalachians, the north coast of Lake Superior, the Ozarks of Missouri or the Rockies bright with golden aspens, autumn is a glorious time of year.

Someone once asked an aging Mark Twain where his favorite spot in the whole world was. His answer, "Anywhere in Missouri in October."

For me, it would be a wandering journey on the two-lane roads in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, with an occasional stop at a crossroads market to sample the apple cider and buy a bag of apples to perfume the car and also provide a delicious snack from time to time.

And, of course, several meals of fresh-caught lobster, topped off with Indian pudding.

Mother Nature certainly came up with a wondrous blend of excitement, nostalgia, beauty and anticipation to write the last chapters of any year.

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