

Decorating Ukranian-style Eggs Is Mitchell Family Tradition

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As Easter approaches plans for traditions gain momentum. New clothes are purchased, Easter egg dyes examined, beaming little faces anticipate good things to come in baskets.

While some families have a "typical" Easter, others delve deep into their heritage for their traditions - ones that pass a heart-felt link from one generation to the next.

In the months of preparation before Easter, Connie Mitchell of Lewistown, colors Easter eggs. But not in the usual way. Her Easter eggs are decorated Ukranian-style. Whether it's the eggs, the designs, or the tools used, everything involved means tradition to Connie.

"It's just something we've done all our lives. And it wouldn't be Easter if we didn't do them, she said.

"Do them" means hard boiling the eggs, lighting a candle, and gathering the old styluses. Using these simple, hand-made tools, Connie decorates the eggs, before dyeing them.

"When we were kids, we'd all get our little sticks with the wires at the end and stand around the table with the candle. We dipped the head of the metal tip into the flame, then into the wax, and that put the design onto the egg."

Some of the styluses that Connie uses were made by her great-great aunt and one was made by her grandmother.

"My grandmother took the metal cap of old bottles, flattened it, and rolled it until it became a cylinder. Then she'd wire that onto the end of the stick," Connie said.

By heating the metal end and dipping it into the wax, Connie cre-

ates designs on the eggs as traditional as the process itself.

Since her father's family was Ukranian and her mother's family was Polish, Connie explains this tradition that began in Eastern Europe long before Christianity. The common people worked the earth to supply their needs. People believed an image on an egg would ensure the sun's return.

Before Christ's birth, dots on the eggs meant stars. After his birth, dots meant the tears of Mary. Eggs symbolized new life. The white shells meant purity and innocence. When a chick hatches, it rolls out of the shell the same as rolling away the tombstone where Christ was buried.

Connie's basket of decorated eggs tells quite a story.

She said, "Some of these eggs are 10 years old. The yolk inside becomes dehydrated."

Showing amid the deep, rich colors of the eggs are designs of rams horns for strength and friendship, spirals for protection, wheat, stars, and triangles for mother, father and children, horses or reindeer as symbols of wealth or prosperity, and spiders and webs as symbols of good luck.

Red is for the sun, brown and orange for nature, the earth and crops; blue represents the water, sea, and sky; and black means eternity and darkness and the time before dawn.

There is one egg not kept in the basket — a special egg, intricately detailed, that deserves extra protection.

"This is my Mother's egg — it's 42 years old," Connie said.

Obviously, these eggs will last for several years if cared for properly.

"I store them in the carton placed in a dark-room. I wouldn't put them in the attic. If you put them in direct sunlight, they will

fade. You'll not know if one has a crack in it until the next year. If it does, I give it a pitch," she said.

Connie describes the decorating process. "The wax is put on the egg from the stylus. Wherever the wax touches the egg, it leaves a white mark. Once you put it into the color, everywhere the wax was put on, it will leave a white mark. Where there is no wax, the shell will accept the color.

"After the wax is put on, I dip them into the colors. The purple color here is the original purple dye, she says referring to a deeply colored egg. "We always use purple. This purple is dark because of the dye made from an artist's pencil. They used to have an indelible purple pencil that teachers used for grading or marking.

But you can't buy those anymore. You could take the wood off the pencil and heat the color pencil in water on the stove. I can make at least a pint of dye from half of a pencil, which will last for years," Connie said.

Since the pencils are nearly impossible to find, Connie suggests using food coloring instead of the store-bought coloring tablets. "If anyone wants to do nice pretty eggs, the best thing to do is to buy regular, pure food coloring and mix it with vinegar. I make it pretty strong to get nice deep colors," she said.

"After I take them out of the color, I leave them air dry at least overnight," Connie explains.

The next step in the process seals the eggs. "Then the next day, I take an iron skillet, turn it upside down on my stove burner and it creates the same type of a surface we used to use a long time ago with a cook stove. You can't put it on high - about medium. Then take an old T-shirt and rub it on the bottom of the frying pan. When it becomes pretty warm, I go real easy over the wax. It melts the wax off of the egg and seals the color. That makes them last from one year to the next."

Connie said, "Some of the store-bought eggs today don't accept the colors like the old chicken eggs (straight from the farm). Something is done to the eggs (before being sold to the grocery stores) that keeps the color from penetrating the egg shell."

With a life already full of traditions, Connie married into another heritage. She and her husband David live on the 300-acre dairy farm that has been in the Mitchell family for more than 200 years. Their daughter Patricia teaches school while their son David farms with his father.

"I insist that my kids come home and do at least a couple of eggs sometime before Easter. They each have their favorite stylus," Connie said.

Answering requests each year, Connie demonstrates her egg decorating technique and describes the history for civic and social organizations. Many want to buy the eggs.

"I won't sell these. We give these away to friends for good luck. If you sold them it would just take out all the meaning."

The rich tradition others admire is a way of life for many.

Connie said, "It has been part of my life all these years. What's nice is we still keep it going. I don't want it to die."



Connie Mitchell shows an egg decorated 42 years ago, which is a prized possession from her mother.

Homestead Notes



If the decorated eggs are stored properly, they will last for many years.



In a home rich with tradition, Connie Mitchell of Dry Valley Road, Lewistown, displays the Ukranian way of decorating Easter eggs. Designs are applied with wax from the candle. The eggs are then dyed and the wax carefully removed with a warm cloth.