

Chapter 5

EARLIEST RECORDS

Wedding Customs of Ukrainians in the Early 17th Century by G.L.Beauplan (1660)¹

Permit me to describe the wedding ceremony of the inhabitants of Ukraine and mention a few words about their courting traditions. I am certain many will find my account interesting, even incredible. In Ukraine, contrary to every other people, it is not the boys who woo the girls, but the girls who offer them their hand in marriage, and it is rare for the girls not to achieve their goal; they are helped by a singular superstition, which is strictly adhered to, so that they are more successful than those youths who occasionally resolve to seek a match with the girl they love.

The wooing takes place thus: the enamoured beauty comes to her beloved when he and his parents are at home. Crossing the threshold, she greets them according to the Ukrainian tradition with the words: “May God help you!” and takes a seat; then she addresses the swain who has charmed her, referring to him by name (Ivan, Fedir, Dmytro, Mykyta – these are common names in Ukraine) and says to him: “I see that you are a good person, that your wife will be happy and will have a caring master. I ask you to marry me.” With similar words she addresses the father and mother, pleading with them to agree to the marriage. If the parents do not give their consent or refuse, using their son’s young age as an excuse – the girl tells them that she will not leave the house until the son is able to marry her, and that only death can separate her from her beloved. Having said this, she stubbornly demands his hand in marriage and threatens not to leave the house until her wish is satisfied. Within a few weeks the parents are not only forced to agree to the marriage, but will even prevail upon their son to fall in love with the girl, that is marry her; and the lad, seeing how determined the girl is to do him good, views her as his future ruler and badgers his parents for permission to love her. In this way girls in Ukraine quickly establish themselves, forcing the parents to carry out their inevitable demand. The girl cannot be refused. Ukrainians are convinced that by not fulfilling a girl’s wish, they will incur the wrath of the Lord and misfortune will visit their home; to drive the girl out of their home will be to insult her whole clan, which will then take revenge. Besides, they dare not use force, fearing the stern punishment of the church, a large monetary fine and public disgrace. So therefore superstition forces Ukrainians, where possible, to avoid this misfortune, which in their understanding (and it has almost become a dogma of belief) is an inevitable consequence of refusing the girl. Such a custom exists only among people of equal class, that is among the peasants, who are

nearly all equal in their wealth. Occasionally love creeps into the heart of a simple villager and an aristocratic girl: the following custom can assist them.

Every Sunday and during religious festivals throughout the villages of Ukraine the peasants, with their wives and children, gather in the tavern after lunch; the men and women spend their time reveling, while the youths and girls make merry on the village common, dancing to the pipe. The landowner usually comes with his family to view the amusements of the young, sometimes allowing the commoners to dance in front of the manor house, taking part in the festivities with his wife and children. It should be added that, as a rule, villages in Ukraine and Podillia are surrounded by woods with secret hiding places where the inhabitants can take cover during the summer from the savage Tatars. These woods are a good half a mile deep. Though the peasants are considered serfs, from way back they have enjoyed the right and freedom to kidnap a noble maiden during the festivities, even the daughter of their landlord. However, agility and dexterity are necessary here: the kidnapper must inevitably slip off with his prey into a nearby wood and remain hidden there for at least twenty-four hours. Only then is the bold fellow forgiven; otherwise he can lose his head. If the kidnapped girl wishes to marry him, he is obliged, under pain of death, to marry her; if not, then the kidnapper is absolved from punishment. Those who aren't agile enough or are found before the day is out, are beheaded without a second thought. And yet, in the seventeen years I have spent in Ukraine, I have not once heard of such a kidnapping taking place. I saw girls seeking out husbands and the success they achieved in their endeavours, carried out by the means described above; however, it is much too dangerous to kidnap a noble maiden; to spirit her off by force in front of everyone else and to hide with her requires strong feet and, besides this, the prior consent of the girl herself. It is quite difficult to get her consent: farmers are now held in contempt and the nobility has become more power hungry and haughty. In all probability, the right to kidnap a noble maiden existed for the farmer back in the times when the Poles elected as their king the man who could run barefoot the fastest, believing that such a man would be the bravest and wisest, as if bravery and intelligence depended on agility and swift feet.

The Poles probably wished in this way to show their respect for people naturally endowed with speed and swiftness. This is evident even today: they value only the swiftness of a horse and pay enormous sums for it. It seems such a passion comes from the fact that a good horse will easily catch up to the retreating enemy and will more easily spirit a horseman away from danger.

Weddings are celebrated thus in Ukraine: having called together several youths and girls, the bride and groom send them off to their relatives with an invitation to the wedding and, as a sign of their duty, they are each given a garland of flowers (which is worn fixed to their arm) and a list of all the people to be invited to the celebration. The young people go in couples, led by a swain holding a staff

in his hands and reciting greetings and invitations on everyone's behalf. I will refrain from describing the dishes served at weddings; suffice to say that the bride is dressed before the marriage in a very long dress the colour of coffee, with a wide trim of semi-silk material over the chest and with an enormous farthingale billowing out in all directions. No headgear is worn, apart from a garland of flowers; the hair falls onto the shoulders, the chest and neck are covered; only the face is exposed. The father, mother or a close relative lead the bride off to church; before them walk two musicians playing a pipe and a violin; after the ritual of the church ceremony one of the relatives takes the bride by the arm and accompanies her home, followed by the same two musicians.

I will not say a word about the wedding revelry, which is just as strange in Ukraine, as in other lands; suffice to say that at the banquet the innate passion for wine transcends all limits of moderation. For weddings and christenings the landowners allow the villagers to brew their own beer: so that people can drink to their heart's desire without additional expense. At all other times the villager must buy his beer from the landlord's brewery.

When it is time to put the bride to bed, the groom's relatives lead her into the bedroom; they undress her completely and inspect her from all sides, even her hair, ears, toes, to be sure that she has not concealed a needle or piece of paper saturated with red dye, and if anything of the kind is found, a terrible fuss is made at the wedding banquet; if nothing is found – they dress the bride in a completely white new cotton chemise; then, laying her in bed, they quietly bring in the groom. A curtain is drawn around the bed, practically all the guests gather in the bedroom, men raise their chalices and dance to the pipe, the women clap hands, dancing until the conjugal union is consummated. If the bride shows any signs of delight, all the guests jump for joy, clap and create a merry din.

Meanwhile the groom's female relatives stalk around the bed, listening, and then pull back the curtain, dress the bride in another white chemise, and when they spy signs of chastity on the first chemise, they announce this to the whole household; the merriment breaks its banks like a flood. As a sign that the bride is now a woman, a *kychka* is placed atop her head, for only married women may cover their heads; girls always go about bare-headed and would consider it a disgrace to wear a *kychka*.

The following day the comedy is even more amusing; it can even seem unbelievable to those who have not witnessed it: a stick is passed through the sleeves of the chemise removed from the bride and this is carried about the town with the solemnity of an honorary banner commemorating some glorious battle, so that the whole populace can be assured of the bride's chastity and the groom's virility. The guests follow behind with music, songs and dances; boys walk arm in arm with girls who were present at the wedding; people crowd about and accompany the procession to the home of the couple.

However, if no signs of maidenhood are found on the chemise, the banquet stops, the men toss their glasses to the ground, the women stop singing; and the shamed relatives of the bride must endure all manner of insults. In other words, everything in the house goes head over heels: they smash the pots in which the festive dishes were cooked, clay drinking mugs are thrown to the ground, a horse yoke is placed on the bride's mother and she is made to sit in under the icons, whereupon the most insulting songs are sung and she is offered drink out of a potshard and chided for not having guarded her daughter's chastity. Finally, after telling her everything on their minds, the guests leave, complaining about such an unpleasant incident, while the shamed relatives of the bride lock themselves in their houses for several days.

As for the groom, he must decide whether he wants to live with his wife or throw her out of the home. Having decided on the former, the groom must endure all the insults people may want to direct at him.

All the same, Ukrainian girls must be paid their due. Although the freedom to drink vodka and mead can lead to temptation, however the grand derision and shame which they endure upon losing their virginity make them abstain from temptation. [...]

A Description of the Wedding Rites of the Ukrainian Common Folk by H.Kalynovsky,[#] 1777.

Matchmaking among the common folk of Little Russia and Slobodian Ukraine takes place in the following way: after reaching the appropriate age, a son informs his father that he has taken a liking to a certain girl in the neighborhood and has intentions of marrying her. Acquiescing to his son's request and seeing the need for it himself, the father invites along two old kinsmen or neighbours, advises them of his son's intentions, whereupon the son himself appears, bows low before them and humbly asks them to take upon themselves the burden of going to such and such a man, a resident of their village or some other village, to ask for his daughter in marriage. And having received their agreement to perform the necessary task, he hands each of them a staff, as a sign of his commission to them. After handing them a bread baked specially for the occasion, he sees them out through the gate, from where these matchmakers (or *starosty*, as the locals call them) go to the home of the girl's father. When they enter his house they place the bread on the table and greet the father, wishing him prosperity in everything.

The host invites them to sit down and asks them about various things: replying briefly to the host's questions, they strike their staffs against the floor to indicate that this is not what they have come to discuss; at this point they attempt to make

their intentions known. Hearing them out, the father asks for time to think things over, and if he considers the young man worthy of his daughter, he enters the adjoining room where his wife is sitting and, calling his daughter in, asks her if she fancies the lad. If she likes him, the daughter replies that she is not sure and places herself at her father's mercy, otherwise she enumerates the fellow's shortcomings and voices any excuse to refuse him. Thus, if the parents see that their daughter is amenable and consider the lad an agreeable son-in-law, they bring their daughter out before the matchmakers, and upon a wooden platter she offers each of them a long linen sash embroidered with coloured thread, sometimes even with silk or gold, as a sign of agreement to their proposition. After accepting the gifts from the girl's hands, the matchmakers gird themselves with the sashes over one shoulder, and having left behind their bread as a guarantee of their mission, accept another bread and return to the young man's house with the joyous news. Seeing his envoys returning overjoyed, the young man meets them at the gate and takes them to his father, where they set the day for the wedding, according to a mutual agreement between them and the bride's parents. From that time on until the day of the wedding the young man can visit his betrothed, who of course remains in the company of girlfriends her own age, who converse with her, for they sing no songs up until the wedding; also, the young man brings the betrothed no gifts until that time; similarly he demands no dowry from his future father-in-law, leaving it to the latter's own free will. He has the right to spend not only the days with his betrothed, but the nights as well, promising, however, not to do anything which might ruin her chastity, and this is strictly adhered to.

Little Russians usually marry on a Sunday; therefore, the day before, on Saturday, a *divych-vechir* (kitchen shower) is held in the bride's home, to which she invites girls whom she has selected, who are called *druzhky* (bridesmaids): literally this means "friends" and from among them they select a *svitylka* (candle-girl) who sits in the corner under the icons, while everyone else is at the wedding table, and holds a lit three-branched wax candle fixed to a Cossack sabre wreathed in bunches of guelder-rose berries. Toward evening the groom arrives with his relatives and groomsmen for dinner in the home of the bride, where the bridesmaids are already waiting; they are usually seated at the table opposite the groomsmen or swains and at this point the groom hands out gifts from both sides of the family to the parents and kinsmen, while the bridesmaids sing various wedding songs and dine, later dancing to fiddle music and reveling until midnight.

On Sunday the bride and groom are accompanied to the early morning church service by the groomsmen and bridesmaids and the couple is married after the noonday church service. After the ceremony the groom and his entourage leave the church for home, while the bride returns to her home with the bridesmaids.

The groomsmen, together with the candle-girl, the *svakha* (a female master of ceremonies), the matchmakers and bridesmaids all have lunch in the home of the groom, whereupon the *svakha* and the candle-girl sew red flowers made of ribbon or small bunches of fresh flowers onto the hats of the groomsmen, the matchmakers and the fiddler, for which they receive a payment of one or two copecks from each person. After lunch is over, the parents of the groom sit on a sheepskin coat turned inside-out, with the wool facing upward, holding a large loaf of white or rye bread in their hands. The son first bows before his father, who blesses him with the bread, and then bows to his mother's feet and seeks permission to leave for the home of the bride. The mother blesses him with the bread too and allows him to take his leave.

Having thus received permission from his parents, the groom sets off for the bride's home with his groomsmen, matchmakers, *svakha*, candle-girl and bridesmaids; as they approach, a *marshalok* (master of ceremonies) or the bridesmaids let the bride's parents know that their son-in-law has arrived and place a bread and a quart of vodka on the table. The bride's mother gives the *druzhko* (best man) and his assistant gifts of sashes and then invites them to enter the yard; a vat stands upturned in the middle of the yard, covered with a tablecloth and upon it is placed a bread and a quart of vodka. At this point the mother comes forward, dressed in a sheepskin coat turned inside-out, riding a pitchfork or a poker, carrying a pot of water with oats, which she presents to her son-in-law after greeting him; taking the pot from her, he empties it onto his horse's mane and hands the empty pot to the best man; accepting it, the best man tosses the pot to one side and everyone takes note: if the pot shatters, a son will be born, but if it remains intact – there will be a daughter. After this the groom dismounts and the bride's brother or a male relative mounts the horse and shows off, galloping up and down the street. Mounting their horses, the groomsmen chase after him and after they catch him they lead him into the bride's yard and there, still on the horse, he is presented with wine, upon which the person offering it to him says: "Please treat yourself to some." But the fellow bows and refuses to take the proffered glass. The *druzhko* (best man) then drinks the wine and, after filling the vessel a second time, invites the fellow to have some; once more the fellow refuses. The *druzhko* then asks him, what it is he wants? "Money," he is told, upon which the *druzhko* takes a few copecks from his pocket, places the coins on a plate and offers them to the fellow. After having accepted the money, the fellow drinks the wine and then dismounts, the groomsmen whip his back lightly several times with switches or riding crops; but he moves away from them and then comes up to the entrance-hall door and, taking an unsheathed sabre or a large stick, goes and sits down beside the bride. Meanwhile the groom, the *svakha* and the candle-girl wait in the entrance-hall before the threshold; the bride's mother comes out to them with a burning wax

candle and lights the three-branched candle, which the candle-girl is holding on a sabre. They exchange kisses across the threshold and the groom is led into the guest room (with the permission of the matchmaker and at the behest of the *druzhko* that everything begin, for it requires his approval), to where the bride is sitting with the bridesmaids, and beside the bride sits the previously mentioned adolescent brother or kinsman, whom the *druzhko* asks: "Why are you sitting here?" "I'm guarding my sister," he hears in reply. The *druzhko* then says to him: "She is no longer yours, she is ours now." "If she's yours, then pay me for the food I've spent on her," the adolescent continues. "And how much did you spend on her?" the *druzhko* inquires. "Quite a bit," the boy replies. "Five vats of beer, three vats of cabbage, four oxen, six hogs, ten sheep, a hundred geese, 200 chickens, 75 ducks, twenty sacks of bread, five barrels of beer, two barrels of mead, five barrels of vodka and many other things during the fifteen years that she stayed in our home." Hearing this, the *druzhko* takes three or four copecks from his pocket and, placing them on a wooden platter upon which is a chalice of plain wine, offers the platter to the seller who, upon seeing the small amount of money, does not relent and continues bargaining until he gets five, sometimes even ten copecks. After receiving the money, he moves away from the wedding table and the groom, who until now has been standing in the middle of the guest room, sits down at the table next to the bride, who is dressed in a *kaptan* (fitted linen coat) of grey or white cloth, with red caprine boots with high iron heel-taps, in a motley woollen skirt called a *plakhta* by the locals, in a red apron or *zapaska* and in a white embroidered linen blouse, with two plaits of her own hair set into a circle on her head and all around the head long silk ribbons of various colours are attached to the plaits and fall onto her back; around her neck there are several strands of a red coral necklace, and a copper cross, and she has copper rings on her fingers; the groom is dressed in two dark-grey *zhupan* coats and baggy pants made of the same fabric, his belt is of a bright wool and he has a red cloth hat edged in black lambskin with a pair of wide black boots polished with tar, stuffed with many footcloths and drawn together with leather thongs and brass buckles (one of the boots contains two copecks); on the groom's hand is a copper wedding ring and in his belt on the right side is a kerchief embroidered with red thread. Dressed thus, they sit at the table together with the aforementioned guests. After they are seated, the parents and relatives of the bride enter with chalices full of wine, and then the whole wedding entourage is treated to food and drink; the *druzhko* then asks the matchmaker if the gifts can be handed out to the parents and relatives; first of all the father receives a bread, the mother – a pair of boots, while the relatives get breads and kerchiefs, and the bridesmaids each receive a handful of nuts and two *bublyk* rolls or *krendel'* biscuits; the groom and the bride thus present all the relatives with breads and kerchiefs, while each of the groomsmen are given an embroidered linen kerchief or one made of printed

cotton; then the *druzhko* asks the matchmaker or wedding father to permit the young couple and all the guests to step outside and dance; after being addressed three times, the matchmaker agrees and everyone steps outside and dances to the music until they are called back to the table, and each takes his place, following the matchmaker's blessing.

The table is covered with a sewn or woven tablecloth atop a carpet; upon this are placed white or red wooden plates and spoons, and several knives per person, but there are no forks. One plate and two crossed spoons lie before the bride and groom, as well as a whole loaf of rye sprinkled with salt. In the middle of the table stands the *korovay*, the wedding bread, covered crosswise by two sashes embroidered with red thread and covered with a large fir branch. In the corner behind the young couple, where the icons hang, stands the sabre with the burning candles; both the bride and groom eat nothing during the banquet.

After the first course, which is usually of noodles with pork and chicken, the parents ply the guests with drink and toast the health of the young couple; the same happens after the *borshch** is consumed, and after the roasts and the cabbage, which is prepared with peppers. During the meal the bride's sister or a relative removes the groom's hat, sews on a flower (a *kvitka*, as the locals call it), made of pink ribbon, and while performing this duty she sings a respectable song and receives several copecks from the *druzhko*. At this time the *druzhko*, with the matchmaker's blessing, says the Lord's Prayer and, removing the sashes from the *korovay*, takes one for himself and one for his assistant, and thereafter they tie the sashes across each other's shoulder, then the *druzhko* cuts the wedding bread into slices and distributes them among those present. Everyone who takes a piece of *korovay* gives a copeck or more toward the bride's dowry: after this the guests go outside and dance until the evening. Once it begins to grow dark everyone returns to the guest room, sits down at the table in the same place as before and dinner is served. After dinner the bride's girlfriends say farewell to her and, bowing before her, depart for their homes with their gifts. The maid of honour is escorted to her home by the groomsmen with songs, dancing and music. After this the bride and groom have dinner at a separate small table in a separate storehouse (*komora*). Meanwhile the bridesmaids and *svakhy*⁺ having gathered the bride's dowry onto a cart or sleigh and, setting the bride and candle-girl upon it with the *svakha*, take her to the home of the groom, who rides there on horseback with the groomsmen, keeping to the right side of the bride's cart. It should be noted that soon after leaving his father-in-law's yard the groom flicks the bride on the back several times with his riding crop and says: "Forget the ways of your parents and become accustomed to mine." A bundle of straw is lit and placed in the gateway to the groom's place, over which those in the cart with the bride must drive over, together with everyone accompanying them; then they enter the guest room, bow

before the parents, sit at the table and have dinner in the same manner as they had at the bride's home.

After dinner is over the *druzhko*, *svakha* and the relatives take the young couple to the storehouse and leave them there on their own for some time. Once they enter the storehouse, the bride removes the groom's boots and he strikes her upon the back with a bootleg, bidding her to pick up the previously mentioned money, which falls out of the boot. Then they lie down on straw spread on the floor and covered with a rug or a *voylok* (thick felt material), which they use as a blanket. After they have been alone a while the groom calls for the *druzhko*. After this all present go into the parent's home and demonstrate their joy at the bride's well-being. They make merry, some sing, others dance and sing respectable songs. Then everyone sets off for the home of the bride's father in a large crowd and, having arrived there, in their joy smash windows, benches, tables, chairs and anything else that comes within reach, so that at times they can destroy the whole house, without fearing the host's wrath and, on the contrary, expect his gratitude. And truly, the bride's parents, hearing of their daughter's well-being, do not worry about the damage inflicted; they even present gifts to those who have brought this joyous news, giving them sashes and kerchiefs. The crowd then returns to the home of the groom's father, where they revel until dawn.

The following day, on Monday, the guests assemble in the home of the groom. Early in the morning the head groomsman comes to the bride and, taking a red *zapaska* (apron) from her, ties it to a long pole and sets this up near the gate, where it hangs until evening as a sign of the bride's chastity. Then the bridesmaids, *svakhy*, groomsmen, neighbours, relatives and other guests, having first accepted some bread and a chalice of vodka from the *druzhko*, accompany the groomsmen and other members of the wedding party to the home of the maid of honour and, having arrived there, place a bread and a quart of vodka on the table. The head bridesmaid emerges and pours them wine and puts out food for everyone to eat. After eating, they venture outside and dance to music and then move on to the homes of each of the bridesmaids; similarly they visit each of the groomsmen, the *svakha* and the candle-girl. Having visited everyone in turn, they return to the groom's place and ask his father's permission to take the young couple to church. The father agrees and thereupon places a *kybalka* (a head covering) or a *namitka* and an *ochipok* (bonnet) on the bride's head and ties it around with a red ribbon, allowing the couple to depart, after giving the *druzhko* vodka and bread for the priest, the deacon and the sexton. Once the young couple are brought to church, the *druzhko* leaves them standing in the cemetery or on the mostar?? to sing various songs while the *druzhko* and his helper go to the priest's home and, placing a bread and a quart of vodka on the table, ask him to take the young couple into church. The priest demands payment from them and, after receiving it, goes off to church. Coming up to the church door, he reads a prayer

at the threshold, then takes the young couple and leads them into the church, where he reads the prayer *Pokroveniyu glavy* (The Covering of the Head) and covers the bride with muslin or a veil, sprinkling the couple with holy water and blesses them to return home.

After this all the wedding guests proceed to the home of the groom's father, where the young couple is seated at the table. The bride's father-in-law enters with a staff and pokes it before the bride's eyes, asking her if she is blind. After removing the veil from her head, he offers her some wine. At this point the best man brings up a wooden platter with some liquid honey spread on slices of *kalach* bread, consumes a slice and then tempts the bride and groom with a similar piece, bringing it up to their mouths and teasing them, until he finally eats it himself; after this he hands them each a slice of bread spread with honey and then does the same for all the guests. After being blessed, the matchmakers step outside into the yard to make merry by dancing; the *druzhko* is the first to start dancing, then he takes a plate and fills a chalice with wine, places some money on the plate and offers it to the bride, who takes the money from the plate, drinks the wine and then begins to dance with the best man; in this way she dances with each of the groomsmen in turn and they carouse their fill, then enter the house and sit at the table where the parents treat them to food and drink. The *druzhko* seeks the matchmaker's blessing and, after reciting the Lord's Prayer, cuts up the *korovay* and takes it around the room, giving a piece each to the parents, all the relatives and the wedding guests, who in turn make the young couple gifts of various domestic animals and other items for their new household. Then, taking a slaughtered, sometimes boiled, sometimes raw chicken and surrounding it with bushy guelder-rose and red thread, as well as *stul'ni* (pies without any filling), the *druzhko* goes off with the groom and the whole wedding party to visit his in-laws to the sounds of singing and fiddling and, having arrived at their home, they enter the guest room and place the chicken and bread on the table. The hosts, the groom's in-laws, treat their son-in-law and all the others who have come. Then the *druzhko* tears the chicken apart and hands the father-in-law several pies and the chicken's head, the mother-in-law receives the back part of the chicken and an equal number of pies, and the other guests receive a piece of pie and some chicken. Getting dressed up, the mother-in-law then goes off to visit her *svat*, the groom's father, with all the guests, where they have dinner and enjoy themselves playing various games all night long until dawn. On the next day, Tuesday, all the guests (with the exception of the groomsmen and bridesmaids) gather in the homes of both sets of parents of the couple and move in a crowd from house to house, treating each other to food and drink, without ceasing their revelry. This continues throughout the coming week, until Saturday, after which the wedding rituals come to an end.

Matchmaking and Weddings Among the Rus' People in Red Ruthenia^o as Described by a Resident of This Land, I.Chervinsky. 1805

From way back matchmaking and the wedding have been a great solemn occasion among the common folk; alongside the countless amusements and games which accompany these rituals, they are noted for their pomp and comparative intricacy. People openly acknowledge that marriage is the only reason the world maintains its harmony, integrity and wealth. Marriage introduces the notions of honesty, chastity, a desire to be liked, as well as the necessity for eternal love. It allows the father to feel the hidden voice of nature deep in his heart; it unites the interests of separate individuals into a family, strongly linking the whole of society.

All of a person's inner feelings, be they respect toward a certain individual, or joy, or grief, strong impressions and reflections – all are accompanied by certain rituals. Therefore, let us look how the common folk behaves at its matchmaking, betrothal and wedding.

Matchmaking

It is common knowledge that in the village there are certain individuals among the common folk who usually conduct the matchmaking, the betrothal and the wedding. A fellow who assists a suitor is called a *brans'ky starosta*; the term "*brans'ky*" derives from the word *braty* (to take), and thereby conveys the suitor's intentions, that is he is the one who is to take a girl in marriage and to whom the matchmaker must render his services.

The girl's matchmaker, on the other hand, is called a *dans'ky starosta* (from the word *davaty*, "to give"), that is someone who renders his services to a girl who is intended to be given in marriage.

Having fallen for a girl and wanting to marry her, a young man first of all approaches his father about getting a matchmaker who will accompany him to the home of the girl's parents so that they can come to a prior agreement about marriage. Acquiescing to the wishes of the lad, the matchmaker accompanies him and in the presence of the father asks the bride's parents to allow their daughter to marry the young man. During this time the swain remains silent, the girl is present too, however as a sign of modesty she turns away to the oven and picks at it, pretending to be busy, doing her mother's chores, with no time to eavesdrop on the conversation.

The parents never agree to the matchmaker's first appeal, they see him off saying they will talk things over among themselves and they also designate a time for the matchmaker, father and the swain to come back; during the second visit the girl's parents will agree to a date for the marriage, or delaying, they will set a later date.

Such delays in concluding an agreement to marry usually led to a refusal; therefore, upon returning home, the matchmaker seriously analyzed the reply of the girl's parents and if he foresaw no hope of obtaining their agreement, he would advise the lad not to visit the girl's parents any more. But if there was a glimmer of hope, the battle for her hand in marriage was renewed.

Before entering into an agreement about the marriage, the parents indicated what they would be giving their daughter as a dowry, and at the same time reminded the swain to consider, if such a small dowry would not make him reconsider. If the young man agreed, he immediately invited the girl's parents to his place for lunch or dinner, together with his relatives and kin. Such a meal was similar to the announcement of a pre-nuptial agreement; during this time the swain and his parents acted as politely as they could toward their guests to win their sympathy; they spared no expense on the vodka, for as a sign of gratitude the girl's parents would increase the size of her dowry when they set the date for the wedding. The day before the marriage was usually the day of the betrothal.

The Betrothal

On the day of the betrothal the girl's parents hold a dinner in their home. Both sides contribute toward expenses for hiring musicians for the coming banquet. They bake a *korovay* (a bread of wheaten flour), which is embellished on top with various figures made out of dough, and into the sides of this *korovay* two eggs are placed, which are later given to the young couple to eat.

On the day of the betrothal the bride-to-be chooses one or two girlfriends as bridesmaids and, with plaits unbraided, goes about the village from house to house, announcing the day of the wedding and inviting people to come along. In almost every house she is presented with linen material made of flax or hemp and countless blessings are heaped upon her.

As evening approaches relatives and neighbours gather, the "giving" matchmaker sets about running the gathering, encouraging those present to regale, dance, eat and drink. The bride hands out small hand-made sashes to the guests, which resemble kerchiefs, however she must give her sweetheart a bought kerchief, for which he refunds her on the spot, in full view of the guests, sometimes even overpaying her. After this the table is covered with a tablecloth, a loaf of bread is placed upon it, the young man inserts four copper coins into it and the mother covers the bread with a kerchief, then the swain, the girl, their parents and all present, both relatives and guests, place their hands one on top of the other over the bread, the priest binds these hands with his stole, reads a prayer, and so ends the ritual of betrothal.

After this ceremony the groom immediately gives his future wife a kerchief, which she must wear after marrying; she gives him a shirt.

After the dinner and dancing, as soon as the guests have departed, the bride takes the groom's hat and inadvertently sews a small garland onto it; he returns home, pretending not to have noticed it. Back at home his mother feigns being the first to notice the garland attached to the hat and tears the hat from her son's head, rips off the garland and tosses it into the oven.

The Wedding

On the day of the marriage the bride invites several female neighbours to help her make the garlands or crowns. She herself makes two garlands: one for herself, the other for her sweetheart; this second garland must be wide and long, so as to reach right around the groom's hat. Eventually she sends it off to the groom with three swains accompanied by musicians and immediately sits down to dress. First the "giving" matchmaker combs her hair, the parents do the same, and then everyone present follows suit. Before the marriage the bride unbraids her plaits one last time and combs them out.

Seeing the garland being brought to him, the groom sits down and the "taking" matchmaker combs his hair, followed by the parents, then he puts on a hat with a garland and sets off with the musicians to the bride's home.

While they wait for the groom in the bride's home, they cover a table in the middle of the room and place a loaf of bread upon it. The bride and her mother meet the groom in the doorway; he takes the bride by the hand, behind them everyone else holds hands and they circle the table three times; then the young couple sit down on a bench, the mother binds their necks together with a kerchief and bids them to kiss, after which they set off to church in the company of the musicians.

When the young couple returns from church after being married, the mother greets them dressed in a sheepskin coat turned inside-out upon her head and holding a poker. She brings out the bread and hands her son-in-law a glass of vodka; after sipping it, he tosses the glass over his shoulder and the mother showers the young couple with oats. The oats symbolize wealth; the sheepskin coat turned inside-out symbolizes a good harvest for the young couple, that is the oats will grow as thick as the wool on the sheepskin coat.

After feasting at the bride's place the wedding moves to the home of the groom's parents; firstly the bride's dowry is carefully loaded onto one or two carts: a feather bed, two pillows, a chest filled with linen cloth, clothes and other items with which the parents have rewarded the bride. All present follow the young couple; if the bride is going to another village, the groom must ensure carts are provided to transport the guests. According to tradition, the bride's parents go to visit their son-in-law only on the second or third day, after receiving an invitation from him. There is also a custom of braiding a clove of garlic into

the bride's plaits if she is moving to another village. This is meant to ward off illness and malice from the groom's relatives.

When the young couple arrive at the home of the groom's parents they are showered with oats. The parents of both sides exchange gifts, the bride's mother gives the groom's father a shirt and the groom's mother gives the bride's mother a kerchief.

It is difficult to describe all the amusements, proverbs and songs, at times indecent, with which the matchmakers from both sides entertain the guests; here one can hear the true vernacular spoken and sense real informality. However, it should be noted that the solemnity of the wedding is never lost.

A villager incapable of holding such a wedding is considered to be poor. Therefore, often after holding a wedding for their children a peasant will become even even poorer. For the common folk the wedding act provided the only pleasure and joy; human weakness – pride – led people to incur heavy expenses, so as not to be upstaged by others...

¹ Excerpt from *Description d'Ukraine* (1660) by Guillaume Le Vasseur de Beauplan, a French military engineer, architect and cartographer (born ca 1600, died – 1673). Drew first descriptive map of Ukraine in 1639 and built many castles and fortresses.

[#] Hryhoriy Kalynovsky (dates of birth and death unknown), hailed from the town of Krolevets in Sumy Province and was one of the first Ukrainian ethnographers.

^{*} A beetroot and cabbage soup.

⁺ Married women, who are relatives of the groom.

^o Historical name of Galicia, used mostly by non-Ukrainian writers in the 16-19th centuries, but never by the local populace.