



LARGE CROWDS traditionally turn out on Georgetown's Green for Return Day, the Thursday following a General Election.

## Return Day in Georgetown Brings

By DAVID S. HUGG  
"Return Day", a tradition peculiar to Sussex County, Delaware, will be observed again at Georgetown, this Thursday, two days after the General Election.

Traditionally held at the county seat the Thursday following Election Day, this event serves

to recapture some of the color of the past and, in recent years, has attracted many visitors to Georgetown.

As on past "Return Days", this year's observance will include a parade, an ox-roast, an address by a prominent speaker, and the appearance of a majority of the candidates who will

have competed for statewide and county offices two days previous.

Thursday's program will get underway at 2 p.m. with formation of a parade that will proceed through the downtown business section to The Green.

The parade will feature floats, bands from all over Sussex

County and adjacent Maryland County and adjacent Maryland Eastern Shore areas, fire companies and youth groups. Owners of horse-drawn vehicles and antique cars have also been invited to participate in the parade along with mayors of the various Sussex County communities.

Upon reaching The Green, all candidates will be invited to the platform where they will be introduced by former State Senator Harvey Spicer. Former U. S. Senator J. Allen Frear, Jr. will give the traditional Return Day address.

Following the exercises on The Green, the more venturesome visitors will be invited to join townsfolk in eating roast ox. Preparation for this once traditional Sussex County "dish" will begin on Wednesday evening when a freshly slaughtered ox will be put on a spit over an open fire and slowly cooked for approximately twenty hours.

"Return Day" had its origin in the distant past when ballot boxes from the outlying sections of the county were taken to the County Seat prior to noon of the Thursday following Election Day and the results certified by an Official Board of Canvassers presided over by the Sheriff of Sussex County. Due to the absence, in those times, of a fast, efficient means of communication, people from all over the county gathered in Georgetown on "Return Day" to learn the results and to greet the successful candidates.

J. Thomas Scharf, in his "History of Delaware," published in 1888 and still widely used as reference by historians, students and others interested in Delaware's past, has this to say about "Return Day":

"One of the customs peculiar to the people of Sussex, from time immemorial, is to hold high (Continued on Page 9)



IN KEEPING with tradition the Return Day ox is roasted over an open flame.

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IN RECENT YEARS the sponsors of Return Day have encouraged rural people to enter horse-drawn vehicles in the parade.

## Candidates in for the Festivities

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carnival on the day when the results of a general election are announced. On this 'Return Day' the official Board of Canvassers, with the sheriff presiding, meets at Georgetown at twelve o'clock, noon.

"But early in the morning people from all parts of the county, and even from Maryland, may be seen coming to the county-seat, some walking, others on horseback, and still others in wagons and carts, drawn by one or more oxen, by an ox and a horse, an ox and a mule, or several oxen and a horse, the vehicle being gaily decorated with bright colors or flags.

"Often this crowd presents a motley appearance, some being dressed in costumes which were used in primitive times, and others purposely arraying themselves in an outlandish manner to give more zest to the spirit of the occasion.

"The successful candidates also come to town and are met by a great crowd of admiring friends, who extend their congratulations in an unmistakable manner. Some of these candidates are taken up bodily, and are carried around on men's shoulders when the results are

announced from the window of the court-house to the congregated mass below.

"Booths, stalls and stands are erected near the court-house, where all kinds of edibles, such as opossum and rabbit meat, fish and oysters can be procured. The women, who constitute a considerable portion of the crowd, are generously treated to cakes, candies, and the best the booths afford.

"The citizens of the town hold a general reception, and all are expected to help entertain the people, especially if they are friends of the successful party. Every one endeavors to make 'Return Day' a hilarious one, and all seem willing to perpetuate a custom which is now peculiar to Sussex County alone, and which sometimes brings three thousand people to town."

After disappearing from the Delaware scene for many years the observance was revived in the early 1950's with the successful political party staging a celebration on The Circle. In 1956, the "Return Day" program was expanded to include a parade, an ox-roast and the appearance of the successful candidates on a platform erected on

The Circle. Two years later, both major political parties joined with Georgetown merchants and other civic leaders in mak-

ing "Return Day" truly bi-partisan and somewhat of a local holiday. The observance was further expanded in 1960 and

in 1962, and this year's observance is, according to residents of the Georgetown area, expected to be "the best yet."

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## LOCAL HOLIDAYS IN LOWER DELAWARE

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In certain remote corners of our world you may still sometimes stumble upon a section which continues to retain certain customs and remain stationary while everything around it is in motion.

There is a custom which is peculiar to the people of Sussex County, Delaware. In 1942, for the first time in over one hundred and fifty years, "Return Day", one of the oldest traditional observances, was not held because of the War and lack of transportation.

During the earlier part of our State's history it took several days to get the election returns from the outlying districts into the County Seat, which was Georgetown, formerly known as "Dales Crossroads" until October 26, 1791. At this time the Seat of Justice was removed from Lewistown to this more central location, and an Act of the Legislature declared the name of the Town where the County buildings were being erected should be Georgetown, in honor of Commissioner George Mitchell, who was active in the movement with Daniel Pelk and Woodman Steckley and others, all prominent men of that time.

On this "Return Day" the returns were brought to Georgetown by mounted election officers, who rode well and hard to reach the goal before their rivals. They obviously were proud of their speedy horses and landed in the Square

with an air of importance, delivering their slips officially designated as such to the Board of Canvassers. This Official Board, with the Sheriff presiding, sat at Georgetown at twelve o'clock, Noon, on Thursday after the election on Tuesday. The results of the election were hastily recopied and in large figures displayed to the waiting crowd on a huge white sheet that partially veiled the front of the old Court House. They were also announced in a loud voice from the Court House steps to the assembled throng in the Public Square known as "The Green".

After the returns were announced, the winning party held a parade. On the occasion of Governor Stockley's election, the Wilmington "Sunday Star" of November 12, 1882, reports as follows:-

"The procession moved through the town while people cheered and guns boomed. A boat in bright new paint was mounted on wheels, rigged like a ship, and labeled the 'Old Constitution'. The craft was profusely decorated with a blue hen draped in ribbon and a dried coon skin was suspended from the mast. Six men on horseback moved in front and one hundred and twenty mounted men in the rear, all decorated and giving back to the crowd cheer for cheer. Standing on the quarter deck of the mimic ship, bowing to the multitude who enthusiastically applauded and saluted him, was the Governor Elect Charles Stockley. When the ship was drawn into the Square the people flocked from all sides to shake hands with the new Governor and at length he was lifted on brawny shoulders and carried into the Court House above the heads of the crowd, which cheered louder and louder."

Early in the morning people from all over the County and many even from Maryland, notwithstanding the poor

condition of the roads which made travel exceedingly difficult, could be seen on their way to the County Seat, some walking, others on horseback, and in the early days often a man and woman riding the same horse, the woman sitting on a pillion behind the man. Still others came in carts drawn by oxen, or in wagons drawn by six and eight horses gayly decorated with flags, ribbons, and sleigh bells. Later on the automobile and train took the place of the early modes of travel.

In the spirit of revelry in the open streets numerous persons would attire themselves in ludicrous costumes to give more zest to the occasion. Thousands of people were in town and every effort was made to make the day a most enjoyable one. All the townspeople with characteristic Sussex County hospitality, opened their homes during the day and all callers were invited to "rest their hat and have a bite".

In the center of the town on the open Square, once used as a Slave Market, where the Court House is located, booths, stalls, and stands were erected, and cook stoves were presided over by good colored cooks. All kinds of edibles were for sale, such as Delaware biscuit, hot corn pone, with black molasses to pour over it, sweet potato biscuit, opossum, rabbit roasted upon a spit, white and sweet potatoes baked in hot ashes, fish, oysters, maninose, fried chicken, and hominy made in mortars chopped from a sturdy gum. A century ago almost every farmer owned



such a mortar, using it also to reduce corn kernels to meal by pounding with a heavy wooden pestle, the corn placed in the hollowed out concavity of the leg. Hominy needed only the outer shell of the corn removed by the pounding to make it edible--when boiled and seasoned with a pig's tail, it was considered a choice delicacy. Always a large steer would be roasted in the open air and eaten. Hogshead of beer, fresh cider, and vast quantities of Sussex County Apple Jack were consumed.

Band concerts were given to entertain the assembled throng. Cock fighting was indulged in behind barns in which men of the highest respectability found pleasure.

In the late afternoon the special trains which had been run from other parts of the State began to fill and the Sussex folks who had driven to town were saying their farewells and starting for home, their faces expressing the pleasure the day had brought them. Gradually the throngs dispersed and the long-looked-for day of enjoyment was over for another two years. The day was regarded as a holiday as much as any day fixed by law for the suspension of business. As late as the 1930's, a Sussex farmer would never have thought of missing a "Return Day".

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