

Kulig

An Old Polish Winter Tradition

To the Pole, life is divided into the calendar year according to the generous sprinkling of saints' days, holy days, and church festivals. The gayest, and most enthusiastically participated in, is the carnival season which precedes Lent. To offset the somber quiet days of meditation, prayers and self-denial ahead, much



merrymaking is made between Christmas and Ash Wednesday. In the rural areas the carnival is punctuated with days of merrymaking, tricks, parades, music and folk dancing, but the most loved social event is the winter sleigh party or *Kulig*.

The time for *Kulig* is anytime from Christmas to Ash Wednesday, depending mainly on the occasion when the snow is very deep. *Kulig* originated with the gentry, but has been practiced to different degrees, and with variations, by most of the population.

In the past, the preparations for *Kulig* were very extensive and festive, and the celebration involved several days, depending on the geographic area and willingness of the planners. Families get together and may visit a neighbor who they mutually agree will be willing to be the first host, and treat the guests with customary Polish hospitality. If possible, the householder who has a birthday or namesday during these days is considered the obvious choice for host. Everyone in the families, young and old, eagerly joins in the fun-filled days of merrymaking. There is much to do and it all is done with the most enthusiastic spirit. The visiting folk feverishly work on plans and the supposedly unsuspecting host begins frantic preparations of baking and sausage making. The host must load his table with foods that match a wedding feast.



The revelry usually begins with the sleigh ride at night. If the air is crisp, the moonlight bright and the necessary snow as high as the fence, then *Kulig* has no obstacle to a round of hilarity that will sustain them through the quiet days of Lent. In the country, horses ply the snowdrifts, sinking to their bellies in the feathery billows as they pull their happy cargo, and crisscross the farmlands, sometimes forsaking the roads and paths for a more hectic and turbulent ride through the fields to thrill the passengers. Sometimes firecrackers bursting with sharp, staccato cracks, flung out by the merrymakers, rip the crisp air and excite the horses to fling their decorated manes in a picture of charged and high spirits. Even the sleighs pulling the happy cargo become a part of the act. Some of these vehicles, filled with hay for warmth and comfort, are rustic and simple, with daubs of paint smeared on in gay abandon; while others have gracefully carved swans proudly holding up their long necks, or fierce eagles sitting atop, adding to the spirit and fun of the gay ride.



Cares are forgotten. Happiness takes over and bubbles in a medley of shouting noises, songs and music. The traditional *fujarka*, a fife or whistle carved of a willow stem, can be heard in its high pitch tooting staccato notes to add to the hilarity and confusion.

The fun and thrill of the *Kulig* custom have remained the same despite the passage of time. So join us today and participate in this unique event, if only in our imagination.