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Thanksgiving memories not all Norman Rockwell material

By CANDACE CHASE
The Daily Inter Lake

When it comes to Thanksgiving memories, Charlie Rogers had a doozy for the monthly History of Whitefish series moderated by Walter Sayre at the Whitefish Community Center.

Rogers said the best Thanksgivings were at his grandmother's house. But the one that made a lasting impression would hardly qualify for a Norman Rockwell depiction of American holiday perfection.

As he came into the house one Thanksgiving, Rogers realized that his brother and wife were obviously in the second or third round of an epic battle.

"They hadn't been speaking," he said. "She puts the turkey in the oven and I'm thinking, 'My goodness, we're going to have to sit here quite a while.'"

Rogers needn't have worried. Just an hour and a half later, his sister-in-law took the turkey out of the oven not even half cooked.

"She sets it on the table. No cranberries, no dressing," he said. "We tried to find some part of that turkey we could eat without poisoning ourselves. I found a wing tip that wasn't too bad."

LIKE ROGERS, Doug Gilbertson recalled a Thanksgiving nightmare that happened just as he was nervously creating his new family memories.

"Nearly 50 years ago when the wife [Pat] and I were newlyweds, we cooked a turkey dinner," he said. "I took it out of the oven and put it on the table to carve it and promptly dropped it on the floor."

He said the three-second rule was in effect, but it took him about 10 minutes to return the bird to the table.

FOR KATHY Murphy, Thanksgiving meant

traveling with her family out to Braig Turkey Farm in Columbia Falls while Inez Carlson recalled always eating at night when her son and grandsons returned from hunting.

Hunting and Thanksgiving also intersected for Shirlee Yeats. "That was us, too," she said with a smile. "A lot of times I was with them. We didn't have turkey but we were very thankful when we brought home something."

Elsie Galles recalled many Thanksgivings waiting tables for large family groups during her 30 years working for much-loved local restaurants including Frenchies, Sally's and the Hanging Tree. Martha Williamson said her most memorable wasn't in Whitefish but in Albuquerque, N.M., when she didn't have family nearby.

"I went to a homeless shelter," she said. "A couple of young boys were there and I had a nice meal and conversation."

GILBERTSON SAID one of his other memorable Thanksgivings was in the air in a C-130 during his military service. He and more than 20 others were assigned to fly a 10 1/2-hour mission over the ocean.

"It was designed to do a special mission, communicating with submarines under water," he said.

Although working on Turkey Day, crew members had no intention of missing their Thanksgiving feast. Gilbertson said they hit the commissary in Bermuda with a tape measure.

"We had an oven on the airplane but it was built for slide-in frozen meals," he said. "So we're down in the commissary store with a tape measure trying to find the right-size turkey to fit in that oven."

They found a turkey along with decorations including a man and

woman pilgrim, shocks of corn and decorations. It was a mile-high feast to remember.

"That day we served 20 people," he said. "We had turkey, dressing and mashed potatoes. We had a regular Thanksgiving set up there."

ED PRACH grew up on the East Coast but said he has had some recent memorable Thanksgivings in Whitefish where he attended vegetarian meals that didn't even include turkey.

"The people that fix vegetarian dishes — they're ingenious," he

said.

Of the group sharing holiday memories, Walter Mayer was the only one who had an experience that stayed with him for 37 years.

"I was actually married on Thanksgiving Day in Mexico City," he said.

Mayer was studying Spanish and Russian to become a Spanish interpreter for JIK Tractors and Farm Machinery. He recalled that he had a civil ceremony that cost 35 pesos since a church wedding would have set him back 2,000 pesos.

In Mexico, the bride and groom each were required to have two witnesses.

"The interesting question that was asked during the wedding itself was do you plan to share your wealth with your wife," he recalled. "Of course, I said yes."

Mayer and his wife, Martha, shared 37 more Thanksgivings and anniversaries before she died of cancer, leaving him with many beautiful memories.

"She turned out to be a wonderful wife," he said.

Reporter Candace Chase

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