

OXFORD THANKSGIVING

By James Collins

In early 1987, my namesake James became a Rhodes Scholar awarded by the Rhodes foundation in England. He was one of 32 Americans awarded this honor that year. By the terms of the award he was to pursue graduate programs at Balliol college Oxford England. In June of that year, he graduated as valedictorian from Holy Cross College and prepared for his transition to jolly old England. Because of his looming separation from us by the Atlantic Ocean, the family of course worried. We set up a regimen of weekly contacts with us calling there at a prescribed time late at night. Of course there was no guarantee that the telephone which was in the common room of Balliol college would be available as 30 or 40 students used that particular facility as their residence. Luckily, on most nights we were able to reach Jim on our first ring. If not we continue to call until the phone became available.

Our family is very close and we celebrate every event, birthday, holiday, high school event, college event or parent's day and members of the family always show up. Unfortunately, the time to travel to England, stay, and visit, combined with the cost made this custom impossible to maintain.

Jim went to Oxford in August of that year and the first holiday was Thanksgiving. In our family Thanksgiving is a major event. Our family is large and we have them located in many states. On a typical Thanksgiving, we will have representatives from six different states on the eastern seaboard. At the previous Thanksgiving, we had 27 participants and we had a marvelous time. Jimmy was going to miss all this and we were concerned because he really enjoyed holiday dinners with family. Now you have to understand Thanksgiving is purely an American holiday. England and other European countries do not celebrate this holiday. We sent boxes of cookies and other goodies to England to compensate and we discussed his plans on the phone with Jim, but he assured us he would work something out.

A week before the holiday, we chatted with Jim on the phone and his spirits were extremely high. One of the Dons – the title of the senior Oxford professors – had invited Jim to Thanksgiving dinner at his house with his family. They heard about the American celebration and loved the young American kid who was so pleasant and kind. They knew he was far away and missed his family. To compensate for his inability to be with his family they prepared to have a large turkey dinner with their family and Jim. We were ecstatic to hear about this for we knew that Jim would not be alone on this holiday. He was going to a Thanksgiving dinner.

The day after Thanksgiving, we called Jim and asked him how his dinner went. He said it was marvelous and at the same time, it was unusual. Jim then related to us how Thanksgiving went at the Don's house. Jim bought a bottle of wine, dressed up in his best clothes and rode his bike out to the Don's house on the outskirts of Oxford. He knocked on the door and when it opened the Don, his wife and his two children warmly welcomed him. Jim thoughtfully had brought two small gifts for the children, which they enjoyed. The Willets for that was their name had gone all out. They had set out candles, colorful decorations, hors d'oeuvres wine and cider. Cider in England is a hard intoxicating drink. The main table was set for five with the best silver and decorative plates and dishes. They had carrots, peas, potatoes, spinach, kale, parsnips and turnips. It was a sumptuous feast. Jim was concerned they would have

difficulty acquiring a turkey because of minimum demand in England. In later visits, I would observe that the farmers market in the meat section had pheasants, wild ducks, rabbits and decapitated deer hanging from hooks but I never saw a turkey. The adults all had wine and toasted both the feast and the American holiday. Then Mr. Willett went out to the kitchen and brought in a massive serving tray with a big silver cover protecting the bird. As he uncovered the bird, the children and the Willets clapped and cheered. Jim told me he also clapped but he was dismayed.

I asked, "What happened Jim? Were they unable to get a turkey so they served a duck?"

"No Dad, that wasn't the problem. *They boiled the turkey!* However I could not let them know that I was surprised or disappointed so I smiled, thanked them all for the graciousness and I ate the boiled bird. Thankfully I don't expect to ever again see or eat a boiled turkey."

THE END