

hale farm & village

a museum of WESTERN RESERVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Broom Jumping, A Wedding Tradition

There are so many lovely traditions in a variety of religions and cultures, that it seems a shame not to incorporate them into our modern day wedding ceremony and reception. Many couples look back to their ethnic, cultural, and religious roots when planning their weddings. One such tradition we find fascinating is a broom jumping ceremony! There is a tangled history behind why some couples jump over a broom at their wedding.

The oldest records we have of jumping over a broom as a marriage rite dates to around 1700, in Wales. One of these rituals, practiced widely in Wales, was a "Besom Wedding," a besom being a type of broom. In a Besom Wedding, a broom was placed at a slant in the doorway for a couple to jump over. According to C.W. Sullivan, a folklore scholar, the couple had to jump over the broom without touching it to be married. The marriage could also be annulled if the couple jumped over the broom again — backwards.

For cultures where a belief in witches ran rampant, keeping those witches at bay was a priority. Marriages, in particular, were considered susceptible to witchcraft and curses. An article published in the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society in 1908 or 1909, cited by Dundes, said that some Roma communities in Scotland and England in the 1800s practiced jumping over broomsticks as a wedding rite. The broomstick, the article wrote, was an emblem of evil and witches. Jumping over the broom symbolized wedded love defying evil and witchcraft.

In America, we usually attach this tradition to an African-American practice. During the time of slavery in the United States, many Africans were not able to marry in churches or courthouses. As a result, the custom of "jumping the broom" emerged as a nontraditional wedding ceremony which functioned as well as a wedding license in the south.

If you choose to dive into this subject you will find people from different communities trying to claim the custom. You will find historical records of enslaved people, British Romani, Louisiana Cajuns and many others in the face of oppression reimaging marriage rituals.

