

# Christmas Customs the World Over Depict Traditions from Older Days

At Christmas in the Hampshire village of Overton, the hooded dancers gyrate through the streets. As the men of the village have done for 800 years, they act out the story of St. George and the dragon.

This fantastic ceremony is performed by farm laborers who speak their parts in an ancient Anglo-Saxon dialect handed down by father to son over the centuries. Curiously, none of the members now why they should re-enact the story of St. George at Christmastime.

What is certain, though, is that the ceremony takes its rightful place among Christmas customs

the world over—Christian, traditional or frankly pagan—that have their origins in the forgotten past.

In contrast is the recently inaugurated custom of the arrival of the Three Wise Men in Los Angeles—by air from Mexico City.

Even hard-headed businessmen, it seems, are children at heart when it comes to dressing up. For when they arrive to greet the Mayor of the celluloid city on behalf of their President, they come dressed in robes more glamorous than the Magi were ever likely to wear. They wear golden crowns and carry an outsize in stars.

And Christmas being above all a children's festival, they come lad-

on with sweets and all kinds of gifts.

On the other side of the world, in Australia, an innovation that has taken on the hallmark of an ancient tradition is the ceremony of "Carols by Candlelight."

Two decades ago, an Australian radio announcer thought up the idea with the aim of helping sick children. To his surprise, no fewer than 10,000 people gathered, candles in hand, at Prince's Bridge, the gateway to Melbourne, to sing the favorite carols they or their families sang back in their countries of origin in the Old World.

Now every Christmas Eve more than a quarter of a million people take part in the ceremony and guest artists travel the world to be present.

A comparable gathering of the faithful can only be seen in the famous St. Peter's Square outside the Vatican.

Speaking of candles, we are told there was no candle in the stable at Bethlehem. Yet candles have played a large part in Christian worship throughout the ages and particularly in Christmas ceremonies. Symbolic of Christ, the Light of the World, they are said to have been adopted from Roman and Hebrew customs.

Certainly candles were essential to many pre-Christian ceremonies. The Romans used them to symbolize the return of the sun to earth in their great Saturnian festival which took place at the end of December.

Jews still celebrate Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, with candles to commemorate their victory for religious freedom won on December 25, 165 B.C. On that day Judas Maccabeus succeeded in cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem after its profanation by the Jews' Greek overlords.

The early Christians used candles for their secret services in the Roman catacombs. From these various sources the tradition has spilled over into the present and, especially at Christmas, are connected with some charming customs.

In country districts of Ireland people believe that on Christmas Eve the Christ Child walks through the land. So candles are placed in the windows to guide him on his way. In Austria and Hungary the same belief is carried a step further. Doors are left open so that, if weary, the Infant Saviour can enter to rest awhile.

Perhaps the most charming use to which candles are put is in Sweden and in America's Swedish communities. When they came to church on Christmas morning they find that lighted candles have been placed on every seat to welcome them. And Christmas would not be Christmas in many countries without a candlelit tree.

Christmas Eve is for German children the most eagerly awaited night of the year. For their festivities begin that night when they are permitted to gather round their brightly lit tree and see their presents.

In their love of the Christmas tree the Germans are unconsciously perpetuating the cult of their pagan ancestors for whom the tree was the principal religious symbol of the Nordic god Woden.

Since the Prince Consort set up a tree in Windsor Castle in 1841 for the royal children, the Christmas tree has become a centre of festivities in England. His action had its repercussions in America. Today American cities vie with one another to set up in their city squares ever larger, trees around which they sing carols. Record height so far is 200 feet.

Belgium and France, while not forsaking their traditional New Year festivities, are becoming Christmas tree conscious and are increasingly adopting English or German Christmas customs.

In Brittany and southern France the custom of burning the yule log still holds sway—as it does in the northern parts of Italy and Spain.

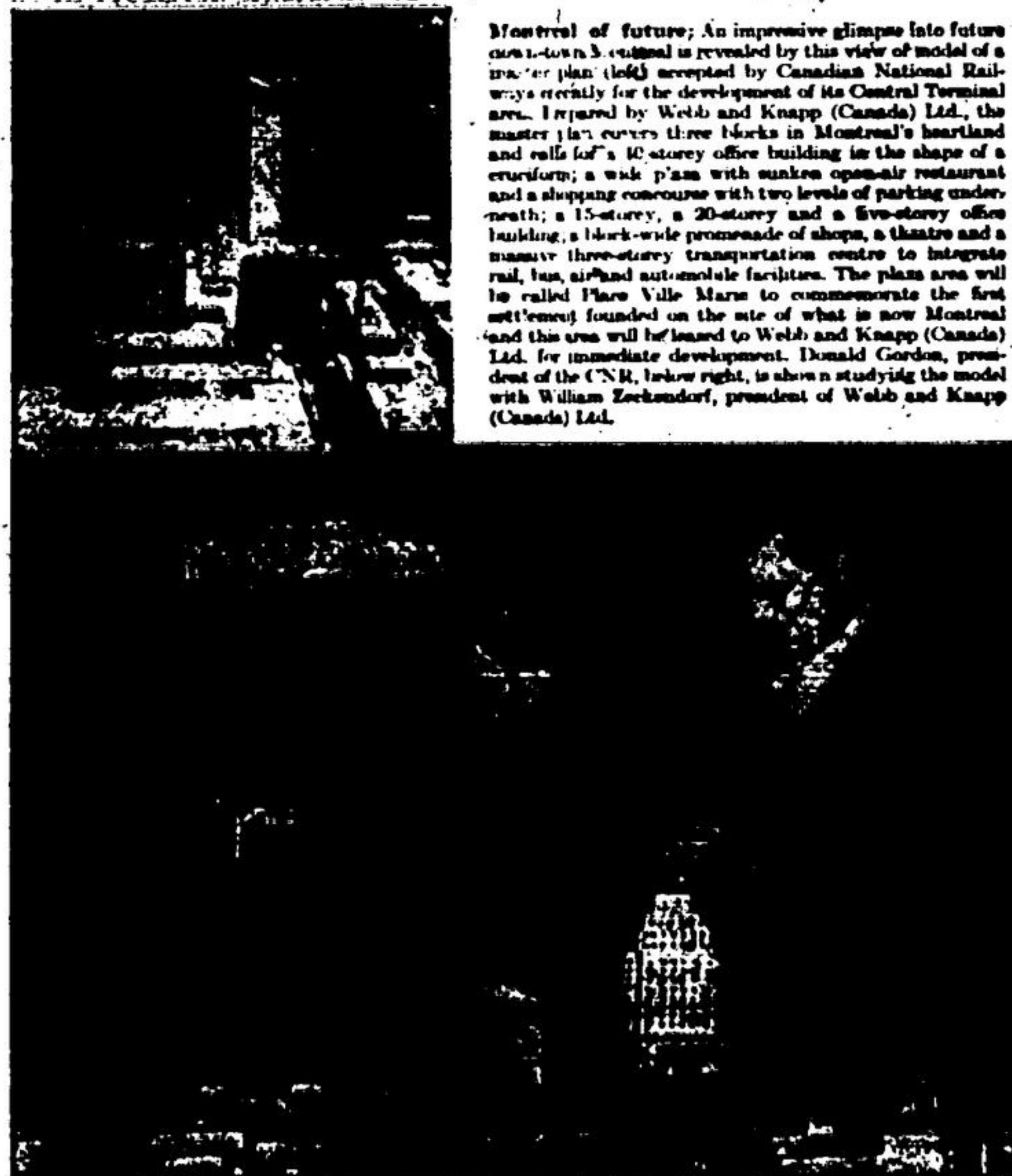
A belief held in common is that the ash from the log has some miraculous powers. The Breton believes it ensures protection from lightning. The Italian and Spaniard never fear hailstorms when they have some of it in their pocket.

The ceremony of burning the yule log varies from country to country. In southern France the whole family go out on Christmas Eve to collect it. Wine is poured over it and, as it burns, the head of the family calls for a blessing on the house. In Italy, blindfolded children beat the burning log and then the whole family sing an Ave composed especially for the occasion.

Another ancient and much loved tradition is that of the crib-pretense to the Italians or puzze to the Germans and German-Americans. The custom was started by St. Francis of Assisi, who in 1223 set up a nativity scene which included live animals in a church in Greccio, Italy, to show how Christ was deprived of all comforts at His birth.

The most elaborate cribs can be seen in Italy, not only in the churches and private homes but also in banks, chain stores and railway stations. They are prepared with extreme care and the figures of the Holy Family, the shepherds and the Wise Men, with their finely carved features, are elaborately dressed with clothes.

Farmers in northern Europe spend the long winter evenings repairing their cribs, which sometimes contain so many figures



Montreal of future: An impressive glimpse into future construction is revealed by this view of model of a new plan (left) accepted by Canadian National Railways recently for the development of its Central Terminal area. Prepared by Walsh and Knapp (Canada) Ltd., the master plan covers three blocks in Montreal's heartland and calls for a 10-story office building in the shape of a cruciform; a walk plaza with sunken open-air restaurant and a shopping concourse with two levels of parking underneath; a 15-story, a 20-story and a five-story office building; a 14-story promenade of shops, a theatre and a massive three-story transportation centre to integrate rail, bus, and automobile facilities. The plan area will be called Place Ville Marie to commemorate the first settlement founded on the site of what is now Montreal and this area will be leased to Walsh and Knapp (Canada) Ltd. for immediate development. Donald Gordon, president of the CNR, below right, is shown studying the model with William Zeckendorf, president of Walsh and Knapp (Canada) Ltd.

Volunteer workers of the Canadian Red Cross served 768,825 meals and snacks at eight Red Cross Lodges in 1956.

Thirty Canadian Red Cross representatives have participated in the Hungarian refugee relief operation in Europe.



The Christmas Bell rings out glad tidings to all our loyal friends and customers: wishing you a happy holiday.

**BRADLEY'S MEAT MARKET**

**TO OUR FRIENDS**

**A MERRY YULETIDE**

**Acton Woodcrafts**

**Greetings**

To all our friends—old and new—our warmest wishes for a Merry Holiday Season!

**TenPro Distributors Limited**

ACTON ONT.

**Holiday Greetings**

To all of you whom we have been privileged to serve—we extend our thanks for your patronage and our best wishes that your Christmas be filled with much happiness and joy!

**Frank's Sunoco Service Station**

Highway No. 7 Acton, Ont.

that a whole room is filled with them. In many parts of Germany, Austria, Italy and South America, there are clubs where children learn to build their own cribs, being encouraged to use their imagination in producing different styles and shapes.

Americans of German descent in Pennsylvania go out-visiting at Christmas that is, visiting one another's homes to view their friends' cribs, which might contain hundreds of figures, fanciful landscapes, waterfalls, bridges, fountains and sometimes, whole villages.

Among the world's more unusual Christmas customs is that of the Yugoslav housewife sprinkling the tablecloth with wine so that a guest who happens to knock over his glass need not be ashamed. For in that country it is no disgrace to drink too much at Christmas. Another Yugoslav custom is for children to blind their parents to chairs and release them only when given their presents.

In America, garlands of evergreens and holly on the front door symbolize goodwill from the householder to the passerby, while in the West of England such a wreath is intended to keep the devil out and good luck in.

At Queen's College, Oxford, on Christmas morning the feast of the bear's head is celebrated. For centuries the Provost and Fellows have walked in solemn procession to the great dining hall while old carols are sung. The bear's head, roasted and stuffed with an apple in its mouth, follows, held high on a silver dish.

This was the Englishman's traditional Christmas dish long before the turkey arrived from across the Atlantic and is believed to be a relic of paganism from the time of the Danish conquest in the seventh century. In Denmark today—as in the rest of Scandinavia—fish forms the chief item on the yuletide menu.

The Danes follow this by eating a rice pudding which has a bitter almond in it. The finder is guaranteed good fortune.

The Serbs hide a lucky coin in their cake—like the lucky charms in the English Christmas pudding—while Rumanians bake cakes made in folds symbolic of Christ's swaddling clothes. In the Tyrol, milk is left out when the household goes off to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—a gift for the Child and His Mother.

But what about St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus? He makes his appearance on December 6 in many European countries. The children welcome him eagerly for his arrival means an early delivery of presents.

One of the more elaborate ceremonies in Switzerland at this time of year is the arrival of St. Nicholas. He had a bodyguard of about 30 white robed dancers wearing six foot tall hats resembling stained-glass windows through which candles shine.

While hanging up a stocking is the more widespread custom, Basque and Dutch children put their shoes or sabots on the Three Kings can put their gifts.

Christmas boxes are believed to be of pagan origin, the practice of exchanging gifts being part of the Roman Saturnalia and Nordic yule festivities. The Christmas custom can be traced, some believe, to the boxes into which sailors and travelers on long sea voyages put their offerings to the monks for saying Masses for the safety of their vessels. These were presented to the monks at Christmas.

The custom of opening the "poor box" by the parish priest on St. Stephen's day, December 26, and

the distribution of its contents to the needy has added an extra day, Boxing Day, to England's Christmas holiday.

Regardless of how presents are exchanged, the fact remains that life would be bleak without the pleasant anticipation of receiving a Christmas box whatever its shape or value, and of course, the pleasure in giving one.

Canadian Red Cross Home Nursing courses had an enrollment of 5,965 in 1956.

**FARMER UNDERPRIVILEGED**

OTTAWA: Dr. James C. Woodward, associate director of the Central Experimental Farm here and president of the Canadian Agricultural Institute, recently described the Canadian farmer as "a most underprivileged gentleman."

**E. L. BUCHNER**

OPTOMETRIST

ACTON OFFICE

**CLOSED**

NEXT WEDNESDAY

RE-OPENING

JAN. 8th

FOR APPOINTMENT

TELEPHONE 115

**WARMEST GREETINGS** . . . to all our friends and neighbors and to any stranger that may be within our gates at Christmas time.

**Whitham's Garage**

**HOLIDAY GREETINGS**

A word of thank and Season's Greetings to the many friends we have been privileged to serve. We wish you and your family health and happiness for many years to come.

**WATSON'S Dairy Bar**

**Greetings**

Just a light hearted greeting to wish our friends and patrons a Merry Christmas and a Holiday Season that's cheery and bright.

**ACTON BOWLING LANES**

**THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS**

With reverent hearts we pay tribute to Him on this Christmas and hope that His teachings of Peace on Earth and Good Will to Men will find expression throughout the world. May your family enjoy the many rich blessings of Christmas!

**E. TYLER**

—MAYOR