

Christmas was crude for pioneers

By Gwen Clarke
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We have written many times of the crude living conditions of early settlers in Halton County—of the log cabin built on a hastily cleared tract of land; of the lack of neighbors and of transportation. Such conditions were bearable during the summer months, but winter added much to the difficulties of the pioneers and would scarcely be conducive to any form of gaiety.

What then would Christmas be like amid such surroundings? No gay and colorful Christmas cards; no gifts from the home folk; no church bells ringing out their message across the frosty air. Life was still a struggle for survival. Celebrations were impossible; Christmas Day would be marked only as a date on the calendar.

Yet the pioneers would undoubtedly remember it as the day on which the Christchild was born and it might be to their comfort to recall the humble surroundings of the Infant Jesus. In some of the rude log cabins a mother, with her little ones gathered around her, would sit before a pine log fire.

No Santa Claus

The children would listen eagerly as Mother told them the story of the Nativity. And then she would tell them stories of Christmas as she remembered it in the land of her birth; of the little village church, the Christmas Sunday School concert, the good food and the exchange of family Christmas gifts. Santa Claus would not be a part of her story as she would remember that Santa Claus did not have the children of the pioneers on his Christmas list.

Christmas dinner... what would it be? With luck it might be wild turkey, duck or venison although it was more likely to be the mainstay of the pioneer diet—potatoes, corn, salt pork, flour or bran. Hemlock tea and burned Indian corn would suffice as substitutes for tea and coffee.

The donkey, a favourite

The donkey, or ass, was the most valuable animal to the biblical family, and also the most economical, since he ate only a quarter as much barley as a horse. The most menial of animals, he was famous for his stamina and sure-footedness. Humble as

fortunate indeed was the family who owned a cow to provide milk for the children. Letters describing pioneer life refer to "barrelled beef and turnips as luxuries reserved for guests and for such great occasions as Christmas and New Year's Day."

By the middle of the 19th century conditions had changed considerably. It was possible for immigrants and second-generation settlers—if they could afford it—to live off the fat of the land. Officers and their families in garrison towns enjoyed comparative luxury. Whiskey flowed freely. In farm families tables at Christmas time groaned with the weight of good food.

Describes fare

As the years progressed scarcity had been replaced by plenty. The pioneers had learned ways of drying the wild native fruits for winter use so there was more variety in their diet the year round. Mrs. Anna Jamieson, who, in 1837, visited in the Gore district of which Halton was a part, speaks well of the food served at that time.

"Their table," she wrote, "is pretty well supplied. Beef is tolerable but lean. Mutton, bad, scarce, and dearer than pork. Pork is excellent being fattened principally on Indian corn. Fish is delicious. During the whole winter we have had black bass and whitefish caught in holes in the ice and brought down by the Indians. Venison, game and wild fowl are always to be had; the quails caught in immense numbers near Toronto, are most delicate eating... the higher classes of people are supplied with provisions from their own lands and farms, or by certain persons they know and employ... some raise poultry and vegetables for their own table."

As the years passed the celebration of Christmas took on definite shape and form. Treasured traditions from the land of their birth became a part of the Canadian



This charming collection of picture blocks, made of wood with six lithographed views, might have been found under a 19th century Christmas tree. The building blocks are part of a special display of antique dolls, doll furniture and other pull-toys on view in a seasonal exhibit called A Canadian Child's World of Toys at ROM's Canadiana building during the Christmas season. Some of the toys are manufactured imports while others are modest homemade products, but altogether they reflect a charming view of a Canadian child's Christmas.

Christmas, introduced by incoming immigrants. As the population increased family gatherings became the main feature of the Christmas celebrations.

To grandmothers

We have been given several first hand accounts of Christmas way back in grandmother's time. Here is one that is typical:

"We always went to Grandmother's for Christmas. Grandma, Aunt Mary and Aunt Liz would be busy for weeks past getting ready for Christmas. The table down cellar was really something to see! Jellies, preserves, pickles, honey, mince and shortbread. And then as Christmas drew near, pies, tarts, cakes, biscuits, plum pudding and a crock of dairy butter and home made cheese.

"For meat there was savory-stuffed roast duck, goose, chickens and tendersweet, home cured ham. As soon as the chores were done,

Christmas morning each branch of the family would load up the sleigh and head for grandmother's place. Bells would jingle merrily as the prancing horses carried each party swiftly over the glistening snow. Sometimes we had to battle deep snowdrifts, and occasionally there would be an upset and some of us would land in a snowbank.

"But eventually we would all arrive at the farm and grandfather would tell us to hurry and bed the horses before "all them vittles at the house got eaten up." We children were told to keep out of the way and amuse ourselves until we were called. And that wouldn't be long because the women folk had dinner on the table in short order. Grandfather asked God's blessing on the food we were about to eat, and then we all set to.

Homemade presents "The days that I recall best there were generally

the girls; sleighs and home-made pull-toys for the boys. At supper-time there was another big meal and then everyone went home to their chores.

"During the evening there might be another family gathering at one of the connections. There'd be square dancing and games—and maybe a bit of sparking on the side. I remember how well Cousin George played the harmonica for Myrtle's stepdancing. And, oh brother—could she dance!"

Yes, that was one way of spreading Christmas that became increasingly popular with the passing years. And yet, strange to say, in some families Christmas was hardly celebrated at all. We

rather suspect this non-observance was handed down as a result of the sparse living conditions that some of the early settlers could never forget.

A busy day

Thus in a diary written by the grandmother of Mrs. Robert Lyons, Nelson Township, we find the following entry for December 25, 1869. "Mopped floors, baked in morning, made bread, fried cakes, churned, went over to John's on a visit. Worked on my dress trimming and had eight for breakfast."

But whether, we observe it or not, there is one celebration common to us all, from the pioneers to the present day—the anniversary of the Birth of Christ.

Management and Staff wish everyone a Very Merry Christmas

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