

A look at Christmas past

Holiday wasn't declared until 1849

In Upper Canada in the 1850's when the legend of Santa Clause (alias Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas and Kris Kringle) began to grow in popularity, considerable speculation surrounded his means of transportation. Quick, young minds sought solutions to the obvious difficulty of visiting so many homes in so short a period of time Christmas Eve.

According to the recently published *Canadian Christmas Book* by Caroline Carver, the debate focussed on a number of possibilities, among them that Santa arrived a) on snowshoes b) crossing the St. Lawrence on a whale c) riding in a sled pulled by reindeer, and finally d) riding on the back of a giant-sized turkey. As Caroline said: "On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, on Turkey..." It's easy to understand why the reindeer theme won wide acceptance and it certainly has withstood the test of time.

At Christmas, it's fun to look at how the season was celebrated a century or more ago and to learn where some of the traditions we enjoy today have their roots.

Christmas in the mid-19th century was more festive than it was 75 years earlier. In 1784, when United Empire Loyalists began settling the territory which eventually became Ontario, Christmas was likely a somber occasion. Having sought freedom in Canada from persecution in the United States following the American Revolution, those early pioneers had little of material value; a few clothes, almost no food and inadequate shelter. They huddled along the shores of the St. Lawrence and Niagara Rivers fighting for survival and no doubt praying for better days ahead.

Better days did come. Settlements and settlers prospered. Many more people came

to make their homes here and gradually the Christmas traditions we know today began to take root.

According to Catharine Parr Trail, who arrived in Canada in 1832 and who wrote *The Canadian Settler's Guide*, people here did not observe the occasion as had been the custom in England. She wrote: "When I first came to Canada, I was much surprised at the cold indifference which most people showed in the observance of Christmas Day—with the exception of the few residing English families, the church was scantily attended. For in those days, there was no dressing of the houses or churches with evergreens as is now so generally the custom... But while the nativity of our Lord was little regarded, all its honor and glory was conferred on the New Year's day."

The religious Christmas day was celebrated by Anglicans, Catholics and German Lutherans then. Those of Scottish descent, who were mainly Presbyterian, made New Year's day a festival.

That year Catharine set out to decorate the home where she was a guest as she would have done in England. Evergreen boughs were draped over doors and picture frames and along mantles. In the absence of holly, Catharine used cranberry boughs. The cranberry bushes were plentiful in the Upper Canada bogs common to the mid-1800's countryside. Of particular delight to young people was the practice of fashioning a kissing bough from evergreens which was hung in a convenient passage. Under the bough a lady could not refuse a kiss.

Catharine's Christmas activities at first amused her host and hostess but, before long, they became accepted traditions of the season.

Christmas trees had long been a favorite

German tradition before the idea spread to England during Queen Victoria's reign. The Royal family set up trees for their own children and the practice became popular throughout England when an engraving of the Queen and Prince Albert standing next to a tree was published in *The Illustrated London News* in 1848.

Upper Canada's German population introduced the Christmas tree here and, strengthened by the additional influence of British acceptance of the custom, the Christmas tree began to be used in Canada by the mid-century.

Tree decorations included garlands of popcorn and cranberries, decorated cookies, handmade shapes such as cornucopias and drums and small hand-made toys, tufts of colored fleece and dried apple slices. The apple slices were tasty treats for the children on Christmas day. Tapered candles completed the tree decorations; however, these were carefully placed and were lit for only a few minutes at a time. Fire was such a constant threat that, as a caution, buckets of water were kept near the tree.

Glass decorations did not become popular until the late 1800's.

Gift-giving entered the celebrations in the middle of the century, but was usually reserved for the children. Practical gifts such as homemade mittens and socks were most common, but occasionally, a cornhusk doll or a small, whittled toy could be found hanging from the branches of the Christmas tree. As consumer products and more money became available, store-bought gifts replaced the homemade ones. A store advertised lead toys, marbles, musical workmen, toy dogs, horses and rabbits, mouth harps, boats, chairs and Noah's Arks.

Christmas became an official holiday in Canada in 1849. Christmas cards imported from England gained popularity in the 1860's, and Canadian printers offered their own on the market in the 1870's.

As with all the other traditions, the Christmas feasting we enjoy today evolved over the decades as more food became available and imports were easier to obtain. Catharine Parr Trail feasted on goose fattened on the rice beds of ponds and rivers. She wrote that turkeys were found only on old, cleared farms and that beef was only available when an ox was slaughtered to save it from a natural death.

By the second half of the century, however, turkey was a popular Christmas repast. Plum pudding, ablaze with burning brandy and mincemeat pie, nuts and imported fruits completed the feast. In the

isolated parts of the province none of these delicacies could be easily obtained, except perhaps for a few oranges. One man who remembered fondly the Christmas pudding of his past attempted to create one in the midst of the Upper Canada wilderness but lamented that without the proper ingredients, "even though we ate it, it was awful."

After the meal, children and adults would gather in the parlor to play chess, backgammon, whist, Blindman's Buff and Queen of Sheba. This last was a game in which the prettiest girl in the room was seated in a chair. Young men were blindfolded and had to find their way to her to steal a kiss. When success was near, an aged relative was substituted for the young girl. This game delighted Victorians.

Another game which was particularly popular was Snapdragon. Raisins and currants were placed in a large bowl filled with brandy which was set afire. The object of the game was to snatch the raisins out of the bowl and pop them into the mouth without burning the fingers.


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