

Christmas in Halton Hills

# Traditions from all around the world

By LOUI TAYLOR  
Herald Staff Writer

There are almost as many different ways of celebrating Christmas as there are countries in the world, and the different holiday traditions are well represented in Halton Hills.

Canadian customs at Christmas time are an amalgamation of many of the different traditions brought over from the Old World countries such as Germany, Holland, Czechoslovakia and the Ukraine. Some families still celebrate Christmas in the old ways while others have let tradition lapse.

In German families, Christmas presents are frequently opened on Christmas Eve, Barbara Schirm said, although in her mother's youth, the presents were opened on December 25. The family often goes to church in the evening after a light meal, and after they return from church, the gifts are opened. Mrs. Schirm said if the children are younger, the family may open their presents before going to church.

The figure of Santa Claus is a familiar one to German children, since he appears in person to deliver the gifts.

"Before they get their presents, they have to recite a poem, which every child hates," Mrs. Schirm said. "I don't make my children do it, but that is the way it was done."

**NORTH TO SOUTH**  
Mrs. Schirm pointed out that Christmas customs in Germany differ between the north and south, because the people in the north are primarily

Protestant while in the south, most are Catholic.

On Christmas Day, relatives, friends and neighbors drop in to visit and eat Christmas dinner, which is served at noon instead of in the evening, Mrs. Schirm said. She said in the area her family comes from, they have goose instead of turkey. Everybody spends the afternoon talking and reminiscing. At one time, people spent most of the day eating, but they don't do that any more since people have become more conscious of their figures, Mrs. Schirm said.

Helen Bilik and her family celebrate Christmas according to Czechoslovakian traditions. They have a special meal on Christmas Eve which includes lentil soup, a dough similar to macaroni which is cooked and sprinkled with ground poppy seeds and sugar, scrambled eggs with fried mushrooms and Christmas wafers made of unleavened bread.

It is a tradition in the Bilik family, too, to open their gifts on Christmas Eve. Mrs. Bilik said that after dinner, she sends the children to get dressed up, and Santa comes while they are upstairs. When the gifts are in place, she rings the Christmas bells and they come back down to open their presents.

The family usually attends Christmas mass on Christmas Eve or on Christmas morning.

**PUT OUT SHOES**  
Mrs. Bilik said it is traditional for children to put out their shoes for St. Nicholas to fill December 6, just as the Dutch do, but their family has stopped doing this.

The Czechoslovakians have a tradition also of making some of their own Christmas ornaments by hanging fancy cookies and wafers wrapped in colored foil on the Christmas tree. This custom dates from a time when families couldn't afford to buy ornaments for Christmas, Mrs. Bilik said.

The Dutch celebrate Christmas on two different dates, Henry Dykstra told The Herald. December 6, St. Nicholas Day, is mainly for the children, while Christmas Day, December 25, is a more religious holiday.

On the eve of St. Nicholas Day, the children put out their shoes, filled with hay and a carrot for the white horse which St. Nicholas rides from home to home. If the hay and carrot are gone, it is a sign that St. Nicholas was there.

St. Nicholas was originally a Spanish saint who loved children and spent all his money on them. Mr. Dykstra explained, Black Peter, who helps the saint deliver the gifts, Black Peter carries a sack, and if the children were bad, they might find themselves put in the sack, or find a lump of coal left inside their shoes instead of presents. But if they were good, Black Peter will find a present for them in his sack, Mr. Dykstra said.

December 25 and 26 are the two days of Christmas, and they are celebrated as religious holidays, with no gift-giving such as is done on St. Nicholas Day, Mr. Dykstra said.

French Canadians celebrate Christmas primarily on Christmas Eve, Laurent Thibault

said. It is traditional to attend Midnight Mass, then return home and have a loud party that wakes everyone in the house, including the children. Following mass, the family returns home, where they eat and exchange gifts.

The food served during the evening includes such traditional treats as tortiers, which are meat pies, and ragout. After the gifts are exchanged, the family, with friends and relatives who may have joined the gathering, will sing songs or get out musical instruments and have a "jam session", Mr. Thibault said.

**DANISH TREATS**  
Annie Olsen is from Denmark, where the Christmas celebration begins early on Christmas Eve Day. In Denmark, everyone stops work in the afternoon, and the church bells ring at 4 p.m. to summon everyone to church, Mrs. Olsen said.

When the family returns from church, they sit down to a huge dinner, which begins with rice porridge sprinkled with cinnamon, with a piece of butter in the centre and raspberry juice. This is followed by roast goose or duck, stuffed with apples and prunes, served with red cabbage and small caramel-browned potatoes. Dessert is often apple cake, layers of apple sauce, bread crumbs and jam, topped with whipped cream, Mrs. Olsen said.

After dinner, the parents go into the locked parlor and light the tree. When they open the door, the children get their first glimpse of the tree, Mrs. Olsen said. The family joins hands and circles round the tree, singing old Danish Christmas carols and songs to the Christmas tree. The gifts are then exchanged.

The Ukrainians celebrate Christmas January 6, Jenny Hapichuk told The Herald. A 29-day fast begins before Christmas, and at that time the families begin to prepare for Christmas. By Christmas Eve, the house has been cleaned inside and out. A 12-course dinner is served on Christmas Eve, each course commemorating one of the apostles. No meat is served in this dinner, with fish being used as a substitute. The dinner includes Borsch (beet soup), cabbage stuffed with rice and cooked dried fruit.

**FIRST STAR**  
Christmas begins with the appearance of the first star in

the sky, Mrs. Hapichuk said, and this is when the family sits down to dinner. After dinner, the children receive gifts of apples and nuts. Carolers, known as Kolyadnyky go from house to house singing the traditional songs of Christmas, and the family attends mass at midnight.

Nara Bedrian said the Armenians originally celebrated Christmas January 1. The family will get dressed up and visit friends, where someone will be persuaded to dress up as Santa Claus and distribute the gifts. New Year's Day was celebrated January 6.

Miss Bedrian said in her family, they now open their gifts on December 25 and spend January 1 visiting family and friends.

The Armenian Christmas traditions are much like Canadian traditions, Miss Bedrian said. The Christmas meal is usually turkey, and the children are told Santa Claus will come down the chimney with their gifts.

The Jews do not celebrate Christmas, of course, but at this time of year celebrate a festival known as Hanukkah. The festival commemorates the re-dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, when the Israelis, led by Judah Maccabee, recaptured it from the Syrians. The Syrians had defaced the temple and used it to worship their own gods. When the Israelis, led by Judah Maccabee, recaptured the temple, they restored it and re-dedicated it to God.

Barb Stephens said the temple was re-dedicated with a small flask of holy oil, the only flask the Israelis could find, and the oil miraculously lasted for eight days. Hanukkah also lasts for eight days.

"Hanukkah tells us to be ever watchful against those who would harm us, to grow closer to our faith and to other people, and to drink deep of our heritage," Mrs. Stephens said. "Our family also celebrates Christmas because the spirit of Christmas is in all of

us. We celebrate the birth of the Christian Messiah who brought such happiness to the world, and because we celebrate all aspects of the spirit of giving."

**SONGSUNG**  
During Hanukkah, the family exchanges gifts and sings songs. The giving of money is called Hanukkahgelt, in recognition of the fact that when the Israelis returned to Jerusalem, they re-lit the menorah and struck coins to

celebrate the fact that the Jews were once again a free people, Mrs. Stephens said.

"The menorah is the symbol of light and truth," Mrs. Stephens said. "It has eight candles on it, and a lead candle, called a shammas, which is used to light the others. Traditionally, the mother lights the shammas, and the youngest child lights the rest. One candle is lit each night of Hanukkah."

**Simon Fraser**  
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## A Christmas Message from Julian Reed (MPP) December 1979



"At this Christmas time of 1979, the world seems faced with challenges which are going to demand from each of us, a renewed awareness of the values that have given us a country to live in that can still carry the message of Peace & Goodwill to all the world.

Let us remember the message brought by the one whose birth we celebrate, and apply it to those changes and may the season represent a renewal for us all.

**Best Wishes from  
Deanna, Melanie,  
Christopher, Robert &  
Julian Reed**



**TARA & FRIEND**  
Tara Holmes was one of many children who enjoyed breakfast with Santa Claus at McDonald's Restaurant this weekend. Santa was at McDonald's Saturday and Sunday mornings to have his picture taken with his young friends and listen to their Christmas lists.  
(Herald photo)

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