

Traditions observed

Canadian mosaic at Christmas

By Leila Lecorps

Much like Ancient Rome, Canada forms an interesting ethnic mosaic. The Romans were very tolerant of the beliefs and traditions of the peoples they conquered, and even adopted some of the gods and traditions as their own. They left everyone free to choose his own gods and feast days.

Canada is a vast country which has welcomed immigrants from all over the world. Christmas celebrations are therefore as varied as the people themselves, as Canadians celebrate Christmas, in the traditional ways of their ancestors.

In Quebec, for example, French traditions are upheld. Preparation for Christmas begins weeks, sometimes months, in advance.

Mothers draw up lists of presents, so that "baby Jesus" or Father Christmas can fulfill everyone's fondest hopes. A great deal of time is spent thinking about the holiday season menus, since Christmas is a time of celebration and joy, when much visiting is done to exchange gifts, and the celebrating never stops. The house must also be decorated, the Christmas tree trimmed, and the miniature nativity scene or creche set up, usually under the tree which is loaded down with balls, streamers, angel's hair and lights. A star is usually placed at the top of the tree as a symbol of the star which guided the three Magi.

On Christmas Eve, French-Canadian mothers serve carefully prepared seafood dinners and then put the finishing touches on the preparation for the "reveillon", the feast which follows midnight mass. Guests arrive either before or after midnight mass, which is attended by the entire family and their family and friends. If the children are too young and are already asleep, they open their gifts under the tree the following morning, but gifts are usually distributed after the family returns from midnight mass. There are gifts for young and old alike, and hugging, surprises and good wishes abound.

The Christmas "reveillon" usually begins at about 2 a.m. It is really a lively reunion of family and friends, where the delights of a heavily laden table are enjoyed in good company. This Christmas feast, like the New Year's feast to follow, far surpasses any meal prepared during the remainder of the year.

The menu usually includes aperitifs and hors d'oeuvres, "tourtiere" (meat pie), stuffed turkey or goose, vegetables and a salad, with fruit cake or a "yule log" for dessert. Wine flows abundantly. After the meal, parlor games and dancing prolong festivities till the wee hours of the morning.

Celebrations by the Metis, descendants of French and Indian mixed marriages, evoke memories of pioneer days, and the buffalo still play an important role in their feasts.

December 24, Christmas Eve, marks the beginning of a two-week period of celebration, as it does for French-Canadians. Usually there are religious ceremonies, but always huge family reunions. The men fire their guns in the meadows to signal the beginning of the festivities. Gifts are exchanged around the fire, and everyone wears his finest attire, with moccasins and arrow-figured belts dominating. Their traditional meal

recalls the Christmases of "coureurs de bois" long ago. The main fare is wild game: the choicest cuts of buffalo, deer and moose are served with berries, potatoes and wild rice. Many Indians were vegetarians.

After the meal, everyone sings, some play fiddles and others dance. The celebrations are punctuated with winter games, sleigh rides and horseback riding.

For Canadians of Italian origin, family traditions are still strong, whether they come from northern or southern Italy.

Families from southern Italy enjoy a special Christmas repast on Christmas Eve, while families from northern Italy wait until Christmas Day. Since Dec. 24 is traditionally a day of fasting, the menu does not include meat. Fish, and especially eel, is served in its place. Like the families of French origin, everyone goes to midnight mass and then returns home to celebrate.

Christmas day belongs to the children. Presents are exchanged in the morning. Although there are no Christmas trees in southern Italy, families living in Canada have adopted it as part of the North American tradition.

Families from northern Italy serve "panettone", a type of raisin loaf which is eaten as a treat during the day. The Greeks have a similar tradition.

The children receive gifts on Jan. 6, called "Befana" (the Epiphany). According to Italian legend, good children are brought gifts not by the Magi, Father Christmas or Saint Nick, but by an old woman carrying a bag on her back. A piece of coal is sup-

posedly left for children who have not been good.

Families of German ancestry usually celebrate Christmas by going to visit their grandmothers, if they are still living. The grandmother has a tree decorated with so many goodies that it reminds one of Hansel and Gretel, the difference being that the grandmother isn't trying to attract the children to eat them. On the contrary, gifts have been placed under the tree which is decorated with hand-made ornaments, marzipan treats, chocolate and other candies, just waiting to be picked.

Christmas dinner usually includes goose, duck or roast suckling pig, served with sauerkraut and potato dumplings. Black Forest cake, raisin bread and cookies baked especially for the occasion are served for dessert.

Canadians of Dutch origin celebrate Christmas in a quiet fashion, with a dinner of Canadian fare. Gifts are exchanged two weeks before Christmas, on Dec. 6, the feast day of Saint Nicholas, patron saint of school children. Indeed, "Santa Claus" is derived from the Dutch name for Saint Nicholas.

Saint Nicholas also brings presents to families of Polish and Ukrainian background on Dec. 6.

In the Polish tradition, Christmas celebrations begin when the first star appears in the sky. The whole family gathers around the table and shares unleavened bread that has been blessed by a priest. Best wishes are showered on everyone present. Straw is placed under the white tablecloth to remind those present that Jesus was born in a

stable. An extra place is always at the table so that any weary traveller who stops at the house can be made welcome. A picture or statuette of Jesus in also placed on the table.

The Christmas dinner consists of 12 dishes, commemorating the twelve Apostles.

Borsch, a beet soup, is served as the first course. It is followed by jellied fish and "pirogi" (potato and cheese or cabbage croquettes). No meat is served. Fancy cakes and other sweets complete the meal.

The presents are then distributed by the youngest child able to do so. The tree is loaded down with hand-made decorations. Conversation is lively. Everyone then attends midnight mass.

Ukrainian-Canadian celebrations are very similar, but are two weeks later, since the Julian calendar places their Christmas on Jan. 6.

"Kutia", a delicious cake made from wheat germ and whole wheat coated with honey, is prepared on that day. The father solemnly serves the kutia to each family member as he wishes him or her a Merry Christmas.

Among the most original Christmas celebrations in Canada are those native to Newfoundland. There is, of course, the traditional Christmas tree and midnight mass, but in addition, children wearing costumes or masks go from door to door and through old peoples' and nursing homes. They play music and sing in the streets.

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