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La bénédiction du Jour de l'an (*the New Year's visit*) a colour print by Edmond Joseph Massicotte illustrates the old French-Canadian custom of the father blessing the family. Edmond Massicotte (1875-1929) is known for his prints showing scenes of daily life in French Canada.

of the log, the way in which it was burned in the fireplace and even the method by which the ashes were collected.

After supper, still other friends and relatives would stop by to offer their good wishes. Now, candies, nuts, raisins and orange sections would be set out, along with barley-sugar candies for the children. Drinks were offered; the music started and it was "on with the dancing", the quadrilles, cotillions, square dancing and minuets of the time.

### Legends

The unique and sacred nature of Christmas engendered a whole series of legends, handed down from generation to generation, many of which were still believed at the turn of the century.

For example, one story told how, during Christmas night, the animals in the stables, sensing the special nature of the hour, bellowed and brayed the Christmas message or knelt and worshipped the newborn Child as they had that first Christmas. It was also said that the mountains opened, lighting up the sky with reflections of the treasures in their depths. Still another legend claimed that the dead rose and attended mass, offered by the

late priest of the parish kneeling at the foot of the cemetery cross.

Christmas day marked the beginning of a 12-day period culminating in the Feast of the Epiphany, a time more social than religious. Particular attention was paid to the weather of each of these 12 days, for it was believed that the same weather would be present during the corresponding month of the coming year.

Between Christmas and New Year's Day, two collections for the poor took place — one held on the Feast of the Infant Jesus, the other *La Guignolée* on New Year's Eve.

To collect alms for the Infant Jesus, the parish priest, wardens and sexton visited each home in the parish where the priest blessed the family. After a brief stop and a light meal, the canvassers accepted gifts, usually food and grain. These were entrusted to the priest for distribution to the poor or for sale through an auction held at the church doors.

*La Guignolée*, was reminiscent of a Druid ceremony rendered to the sun at the winter solstice. This ceremony had been adapted by Christians into an occasion to help the poor. Certain elements — such as the masquerade and a song, now a

song for the poor — were preserved.

*La Guignolée* began with young people dressed in costumes and carrying musical instruments, going from door to door singing "Good Evening Master and Mistress of the House, *La Guignolée* is at your service". They would then be invited in and served drinks and pastries. Following this, they were given food for the poor, frequently consisting of a *chignée*, the backbone of a freshly-killed pig.

In contrast to the collection made for the Infant Jesus, *la Guignolée* was very jovial — a fact particularly noticeable when two groups of *guignolées* would meet.

### New Year's day

At dawn the children would ask for their father's blessing. This was an important element of the holiday, as can be seen by the fact that children living away from home and grandchildren always visited their family home at some point during the day to receive this patriarchal blessing.

After the family attended mass, the festivities began anew with the tables laden as generously as at Christmas. However, this day was dedicated mainly to exchanging visits with relatives friends and neighbours. Embraces and handshakes accompanied the season's greetings, often expressed as "Happy New Year and may you reach Paradise at the end of your days".

This was the day on which gifts were exchanged. The children, on their best behaviour because "he who cries on New Year's Day is red-eyed every day of the year", waited for their gifts from the Infant Jesus, St. Nicholas or, as a sign of changing times, Santa Claus.

After supper, the best musicians, dancers and singers vied with each other to entertain their guests.

### The Feast of the Epiphany

On the Feast of the Epiphany the holiday continued. A cake containing a pea and a bean determined who would be "king" and "queen" for the day. They were responsible for starting the evening's dancing, which could continue all night.

The festive season ended on January 6 with Epiphany, but its spirit lingered on. In fact, in accordance with an old custom of suspending all heavy work during the cold season, it could be carried on until Shrove Tuesday.

(Article by Luce Vermette in Conservation Canada, Winter 1980.)