

# Canada Weekly

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## Canadian Christmas at the turn of the century

The Christmas season, more than any other time of the year, has the power to evoke longing for days gone by. It brings back memories of our own childhood and recollection of stories told by our grandparents.

At the turn of the century in Quebec, during the coldest, darkest days of winter, homes shone with anticipation of the feasting and fellowship to be enjoyed with family and friends at that time.

The season started early with the arrival of Advent, a period of prayer and fasting, signalling the beginning of the preparations.

Animals were butchered and dressed, while houses were filled with the fragrance of cooking and baking. Pastries and meat pies were prepared along with headcheese and cretons (a pâté of chopped pork or goose meat baked in lard) and the women would try to outdo each other in decorating pastries and fancy cookies. Then, everything was conserved or frozen in ironware or earthenware, and placed in a cold room or buried in the snow.

Yet, in spite of the religious restrictions and many hours spent over the stove, Advent, with its joyous music, was a happy time.

### Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve was charged with an electric atmosphere as the people of those times prepared to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child with fasting, confession and prayers — for, as they were often reminded, Christmas was, first of all, a religious holiday. Thus, those seeking special favours recited five Hail Marys every hour on the hour, from midday to midnight.

In the evening, the younger children would hang up their stockings and go to bed early, while the older ones would set up the Christmas tree, decorating it with garlands of silver and gold paper angels. Candles would be lit and a miniature nativity scene placed under the tree.

This custom of decorating a Christmas tree stemmed from the winter solstice

celebrations held in the Alsace region during the Middle Ages. In honour of this season, a pine tree would be cut and decorated with apples. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this custom spread throughout Europe, and it was introduced to Canada in 1781 by General and Baroness von Riedesel.

### Midnight mass

Around 11 o'clock, the sound of sleigh bells would resound throughout the night air and, bundled against the cold, families would ride to church for high mass, with its blend of solemnity and joyous celebration. Here they would worship, enthralled by the lights, the decorations, the manger and the carols. Afterwards, on the steps of the church, they would happily exchange greetings with the other parishioners.

On arriving home, and after warming themselves with a glass of whisky or sweet raisin wine, they would gather around the kitchen table for a simple but ample meal of pigs' feet, pâté and pies. An empty chair, left for the unexpected visitor, symbolized the Christmas spirit.

During the night or in the early morning, the children would find their stockings, each containing a small gift and, as a special treat, an orange. Years later, the scent of oranges would bring back memories of those times long ago.

### Christmas Day

The whole family would join together for Christmas supper, along with friends and relatives from kilometres around, and together they would feast on turkey and, as a special treat, cranberry sauce. However, the highlight of the meal was dessert, which consisted of a Christmas cake in the shape of a Yule log and a plum pudding brought flaming to the table.

The Christmas log represented one of the oldest customs brought from the ancestral homeland, France. For example, to bestow blessings on the family, elaborate ceremonies surrounded the selection



Season's Greetings

Meilleurs Voeux