

## **Genealogy: Christmas traditions from around the world**

By Medicine Hat News on December 3, 2016.

'Tis the season. We see Christmas almost everywhere we look. Homes adorned with colourful lights, beautiful Christmas displays in the yards, and in the churches, all capturing the spirit of the season. Stores are festively decorated, with Christmas music softly playing, as I wander aisle to aisle. I think of past generations and how they celebrated this joyous season. But then as I look about me, I realize that we have a rich, diverse mix of cultures and heritage present in our beautiful city of Medicine Hat. This mixture of cultures bring many different customs and traditions, of celebrating the Christmas season past and present.

These traditions can be as diverse as the culture and religious practices of each and every country in the world. From the Old English word "Cristes Maesse," which means the "mass of Christ"—the story of "Christmas" begins with the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. The Greek word for Christ is "Xristos." During the 16th century, Europeans took the first letter (X) for the Greek word for Christ and combined it with "mas," to form the abbreviation Xmas. The early Christians knew the name stood for Christ, and they celebrate Christmas Day as the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

For 2,000 years, people around the world have been celebrating Christmas with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature.

Traditions — Norway: "GLEDELIG JUL" — The early Vikings made sure to honour their gods with feasting and religious rituals. A sacrificial wild boar was offered to their goddess, "Frey," in the hopes of fertility and a good productive farming season, hence the Christmas "ham" tradition. The Christmas Yule log is also a carryover from ancient Viking traditions.

Looking back at my early American Puritan colonists, I was surprised to discover that they did not celebrate Christmas as we do today. Their thinking was, if the scripture did not mention Christmas, then you would not celebrate it. They did celebrate Dec. 25 as the feast of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Dec. 6 is called the Feast of St. Nicholas, and is celebrated by Holland, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Hungary. A visit from St. Nicholas meant candy and small gifts would be left behind in the children's shoe for their enjoyment.

Holland: "Vrolijk Kerstfeest" — Sinterklaas coming down the chimney originated from the Dutch, only he was decked out in a red bishop's miter and cape. The children would leave their wooden shoes by the fireplace and Sinterklaas would reward good children with treats in their shoes.

Germany: "FROEHLICHE WEIHNACHTEN" — The Germans celebrate Christmas as both a religious and folk holiday. Today's Christmas tree has its roots in the German tradition. Fir trees were decorated with apples, roses, candies and coloured paper. Fresh cut decorated Christmas trees were introduced to Canada in 1781, by German soldiers stationed in Quebec during the American Revolution.

The Christmas tree was brought to England by Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert from his native Germany. Ukraine: "Veselo ho Rizdva" — Ukrainian Christmas customs are quite unique, and deeply symbolic. Many secular traditions were rolled into Christian Ukraine in 988 A.D. by Prince Vladimir. Celebration begins Jan. 6 Christmas Eve (Julian calendar). Hay is placed by the children under the table symbolizing Christ's birth in a manger. With the appearance of the first evening star, symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem, this signals the start of the Christmas Eve Feast. The Christmas Eve supper, the Holy Supper consists of 12 meatless dishes. Each dish is dedicated to one of Christ's Apostles. These Christmas Eve celebrations are dedicated to God, welfare of the family and remembrance of their ancestors.

As we gather to celebrate the holiday season may our traditions remind us of our heritage and our ancestors. From our home to yours may you have a blessed Merry Christmas!

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