

The Nativity of Our Lord

UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Ukrainian Christmas Eve traditions are steeped in symbolism. The day itself was designated a fast day in remembrance of the hardships that Mary endured as she and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem. All preparations, both spiritual and physical, during the season of Pylypivka lead up to this Holy night. The final day of the Christmas fast was a day of anticipation. All day there was much to do before the special supper, "Sviata Vechera".

In Ukraine, and among those who lived on farms in Canada, care was taken that all animals were fed and given fresh, soft hay. Some of the special foods that were to be eaten that night were saved for the animals also. The animals were treated specially on this night because animals had shared their place of shelter, the stable, with the Holy Family, and had given up their manger for the newborn Christ to sleep in.

In the house, the table and the room were prepared. Hay was strewn under the table and under the tablecloth as a reminder of the humble place of Christ's birth. A white or embroidered tablecloth was spread on the table and a "Kolach" (a braided bread) was placed in the centre. A beeswax candle was put in the middle of the loaf. A lit candle was placed in the window to invite in any homeless stranger. An extra place setting would be on the table for the souls of the dead or for a stranger, should one come to the door.

Later in the day, the father would bring in the "Didukh", a sheaf of fine grain, and would place it in a place of honour near the icons. As dusk approached, the children would look for the first star, for only when it was spotted could the supper be served. Before sitting down to eat good wishes for all the members of the family were expressed by the father. Prayers were recited and the Nativity Tropar or a carol such as "Boh Predvichny (God Eternal)" was sung.

The meal consisted of twelve meatless dishes to commemorate the twelve apostles. The first dish was always the "kutia", boiled wheat with honey and poppy seed. The meal then continued with the other eleven dishes. These differed from region to region, but all contained no meat or dairy products as this still was a day of abstinence.

After supper, nuts and sometimes candies were scattered in the hay for the children. Out of respect for their elders, the children

would take baskets of food to their grandparents and godparents. Throughout the rest of the evening traditional carols were always sung by all of the family until nearly midnight, when it was time to go to church.

All members of the family went to church to attend the Nativity Liturgy, a beautiful celebration of Christ's birth. The liturgy was preceded by a matin service during which the words "Z namy Boh" ("God is with us") were repeated over and over again. Once the liturgy was completed, the families greeted each other with the traditional greeting: "Khrystos Razdayetsia" ("Christ is born") to which would come the reply, "Slavete Yoho" (Let us glorify him"). After visiting with friends at church, the families returned to their homes. Now that the fast was broken, the delicious pastries that had been prepared for Christmas might be eaten before the family retired to bed.

The celebration of Christmas started on Christmas Day and continued for three days. Carollers would be sure to start their visits to families in the village, always starting first at the home of the priest. It was considered an honour to be visited by carollers and no one was ever turned away.

The day after Christmas is the **Synaxis of the Blessed Virgin Mary**. A Synaxis is a feast which commemorates a person associated with the previous day's feast. This day was to remind us of the important roles of Mary, Christ's mother and of Joseph, His guardian on earth. This day was also to remind the faithful of the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt, which saved the newborn Christ from the massacre ordered by Herod.

Celebrated on the **third day of Christmas** is the **Feast of Saint Stephen**. Stephen was one of the first seven deacons of the church: he was ordained by the Apostles to live a holy life helping the poor, widows, and orphans. He was a great teacher of the Christian faith, and he performed many miracles. Saint Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian faith. He was stoned to death by his persecutors.

UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS CAROLLING TRADITIONS



In the days following Christmas Eve through to the Feast of Jordan (Theophany), it was the custom in Ukraine for groups of carollers to visit homes in their village or town. Depending on the locality, the group might have consisted of men, youth, young ladies, older children or a mixed group of young adults. Often there would be more than one group that would be visiting friends and relatives, singing carols both old and new, bringing good wishes for the Christmas season and the coming year, and soliciting donations for good causes, such as church or school.

In the old country, the group would first choose a "bereza", their leader. At each house, the leader would ask the head of the household, "May we carol for you?" The answer, "Prosymo! (Please do!)" was certain to be heard, for each family was honoured to be visited by carollers. The leader would give directions and start the carolling. Very often the group would carry a homemade Star of Bethlehem (6, 8, or 10- pointed) with a candle within and a picture of the nativity at its centre. It would be mounted on a pole and held high. A "vertep" (manger scene) was sometimes carried by one of the members of the group. In some areas, the group would dress as angels, shepherds or other characters from the Nativity story. They may have presented a short play or skit about the wondrous Christmas story. Right after Christmas the carols could be heard, but later around New Year's Eve, and sometimes until the Eve of Theophany, the carollers would sing "shchedrivky" (songs that express good luck and wishes for a prosperous new year).

Today in Canada, it is still the custom for carollers to visit homes of friends and family. They wish their hosts good fortune and sing the much loved koliadky (carols) which their ancestors did many years ago. These carollers are still rewarded in much the same way by their hosts – with a treat, a warm drink and a donation to the carollers' cause.