

The Christmas Crib

By Aloysius Horn

(Written for N. C. W. C. Christmas Supplement)

The devotional representation we call a Christmas Crib takes its name from the manger or crib in which the Blessed Mother placed the Infant Jesus soon after His birth. According to the best authorities, the Crib of Our Lord was not a wooden feed-box raised on legs of wood as so often depicted in artistic reproductions but a manger hollowed out of the living stone in one of the side walls of the Cave of Bethlehem. That Jesus was born in a cave, a rude shelter for cattle, is attested by many early writers including St. Justin who wrote about the year 150 A. D. and Origen in the year 248. This has been a constant tradition of the Church.

As we know the Christmas Crib in our day, we may define it as a representation of the Birth of Christ in which there is shown the stable of Bethlehem and under which the characters of the sacred event are represented by statues of wood, clay, marble, plaster-of-Paris, or even of paper cut-outs. In more elaborate Cribes a background showing the field of the Shepherds and the little town of Bethlehem is also included. The kind of stable depicted usually agrees with the type found in the land of the originating artist though today a conventional style is usually found in our own country.

ORIGIN CANNOT BE TRACED

The origin of the custom of erecting a Christmas Crib cannot be traced to any particular person or time. It was rather the result of combining various Christmas customs and devotions to the Infant Jesus, and grew to its present form space with the development of art forms. Indeed, we do find the mention of a praesepe or Crib at Rome in the eighth century, but from a close study of documents we know this was not a Crib as we now build it, nor a replica of the Cave of Bethlehem as it originally appeared, but rather an oratory or chapel built on the general lines of the Grotto of Bethlehem as it appeared after it had been decorated and embellished by St. Helena about the year 330 and as it appeared to the pilgrims who visited Bethlehem after that time.

The custom of reproducing the sacred spots of the Holy Land, especially those of Jerusalem in various European localities for the edification of the faithful, dates back at least to the fifth century. The earliest extant record we have of such a practice is that of St. Petronius Bishop of Bologna, Italy who in the first half of the fifth century, in some manner reconstructed several of the more important sacred spots of Jerusalem in Bologna.

It is some time before we find another like record, but the practice based on the reconstruction of the Holy Places of Jerusalem, finally resulted in the devotion we now term the Stations of the Cross. As years passed and pilgrims found it more and more difficult to visit the actual places in the Holy Land, an added impetus was given to the reconstruction of the sacred spots at home. By the fifteenth century at least, life-like groups of statues, especially those representing incidents from the Passion and Death of Our Lord, began to spring up on all sides.

EARLIEST FORM OF CRIB

The earliest form of the Christmas Crib no doubt closely followed the general lines presented by Giotto in his fresco of the Nativity in the church of the Madonna dell'Arena in Padua, Italy, which dates from 1306. The bas-reliefs on a bronze door at the Baptistery in Florence, Italy, completed by Lorenzo Ghiberti in 1452, included all the principles later utilized in the creation of the Crib in diorama form, but this form of the Crib was developed in rather recent times.

In the tenth century we find traces of semi-liturgical dramatic performances which were presented in many churches on Christmas and Epiphany. At first we find them in the form of Tropes. The Christmas presentation came to be known as "The Office of the Shepherds," that for the Epiphany as "The Office of the Star." In the old parchments from the eleventh to the fourteenth century recording these offices the term "Crib" is often used. But we are still at a loss to know just what sort of a Crib was intended, for it seems there was already a tradition as to the construction of the Crib used in these offices, and nowhere do we find directions for their construction nor complete descriptions of their finished state.

The next mention of a Crib is in

connection with the Christmas St. Francis of Assisi spent at Greccio, Italy in 1223. Some days before this Christmas the Saint directed that a Crib be constructed. It would appear that when this Crib was completed it consisted of a rough wooden shelter thrown up against the mouth of a small cave in one of the steep cliffs below the Franciscan Monastery at Greccio. To this temporary stable a living ox and an ass were brought. Here, too a manger filled with hay was placed. It is probable that in this manger an image of the Infant was found, but this is far from certain. We do know that the purpose of this Crib was the same as the purpose of our day, namely to inspire devotion to the Christmas Babe.

About the year 1289, the sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio carved a group of statues for the Crib Chapel in St. Mary Major's in Rome. The figures of St. Joseph, the Magi, the ox and the ass are still preserved in this place.

GROWTH OF DEVOTION

The fourteenth century witnessed the growth of popular outward devotion to the Infant Jesus. It was in this century that the manger of the Babe of Bethlehem was transformed into a cradle. The tunes of many a Christmas carol used even in our time may be traced to those composed in this century as "cradle songs" used in rocking the infant.

As for actual Cribes, we find one mentioned by Galvano Flamma in his record of an Epiphany celebration which took place in Milan, in 1336. The Crib was erected to one side of the main altar in the Dominican Church of St. Eustorgius in this Crib was a statue of the Blessed

COLLEGE SODALITY DRIVE PROVIDES MERRY CHRISTMAS FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

(N. C. W. C. Christmas Supplement)

The Sodality, which includes all the student body, of Marygrove College, Detroit, sponsors an annual Christmas Drive which produces food, toys, clothing and other articles for needy Detroit families. Last year, in the college's tenth annual drive, some 50 families were aided.

The drive lasts until about five days before Christmas when one of the large motor companies gives the use of trucks to make deliveries. Contributions are received from the students themselves, their parents, retail and wholesale merchants, and anyone who wishes to give. No attempt is made to raise money necessarily, and where money becomes available it is converted into goods. The sociology students of Marygrove College make the studies to determine the need of the applicants. The names are cleared through the Red Cross Christmas Bureau to prevent duplication.

Many produced a sculptor who devoted his entire life to the construction of Christmas Cribes. This was Sebastian Osterrieder (1891-1932). Some of his Cribes are found in the United States. To the name of Osterrieder is linked that of his pupil, Otto Zehentbauer, who carries on the master's technique. The name of Joseph Bachlechner of Hall, Austria, must also be mentioned as well as those wood-carvers, for the most part anonymous, from Oberammergau and from St. Ulrich in the Groednorthal.

In many parts of Germany and Austria, but especially in the Tyrol Cribes are to be found not only in almost every church but also in nearly every home. In Rome, too, numerous church Cribes are objects

Word for Christmas In Most Languages

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The word for Christmas in late Old English is Crætes Mæsse, the Mass of Christ first found in 1038. In Dutch the word for Christmas is Kerst-misae; in Latin Dies Natalis, whence the French Noel. The origin of the term Yule for the Christmas season is not definitely known, but it is believed to come from the Anglo-Saxon term yel meaning feast.

ST. NICHOLAS REPUTEDLY BORN IN ASIA MINOR

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Although it is said that nothing is historically certain about St. Nicholas of Myra "except that he was Bishop of Myra in the Fourth Century," it is said that he was born in Patara, Lycia, Asia Minor, (the what is now Turkey) and died in Myra.

"In Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands," says The New Catholic Dictionary, "it is the custom to make him the secret purveyor of gifts to children on December 6 (his feast day). In the United States and some other countries St. Nicholas has become identified with the popular Santa Clause."

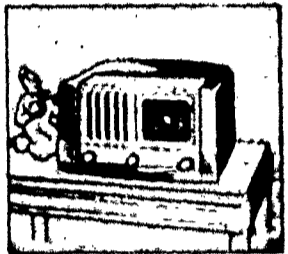
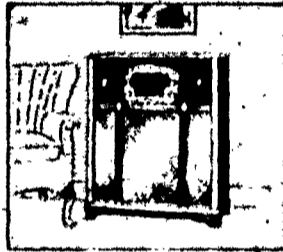
Notables at Funeral

New York Notable figures in the world of music attended funeral services in St. Patrick's Cathedral for Genaro Papi, veteran opera conductor. He was 54.

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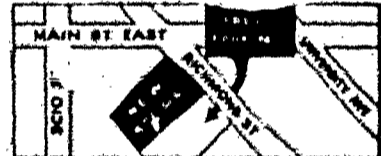
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What matter, that a thousand years and more Have joined the silent march of time's caravan?

For He Who hung a star in eastern skies Would walk the earth again with man

While we, though wandered far from Bethlehem's hills

To this year of wars and bombs and awful things,

Have but to kneel and listen, yet to hear The muted sound of angels' wings!

—Marguerite Gilbert.

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of beauty and an inspiration to devotion. The oldest record of a Crib in the Americas seems to be of that erected by St. Francis Solano in Peru before the year 1610. We are reasonably certain there was an improvised Crib in the Jesuit Chapel at Leprieur, Canada, when Kateri Tekakwitha made her First Holy Communion there on Christmas Day, 1677. We have the actual record of the Crib of simple lines erected by the Jesuit Missionary, Father Enjelran, at his mission on the shore of Lake Michigan for the Christmas of 1678.

This Christmas a Crib may be found in nearly every Catholic church in the United States. Among the outstanding Cribes to be found in this country are those in St. Mary's College, Chester, Md.; Immaculate Conception Church, New Orleans; the Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul, Indianapolis; the Cathedral of St. Peter, Bellevue, Ill.; St. John's Cathedral, Cleveland; St. Patrick's Church and the Church of St. Catherine of Siena, Toledo; St. Mary's Church,iffin, O.; St. Anthony's Church, Ocean Side, N. Y.; St. Francis of Assisi Church, New York; and St. Joseph's Church, Buffalo.

The Christmas Crib has now reached every corner of the world. There is no other means of teaching the story of the Nativity so effectively. In the United States the Crib is not confined to churches and homes; it has also found its way to the great out-of-doors. The Christmas Crib also has a special appeal to the pagans in mission lands.

In the Metropolitan Museum in New York City is a group of beautiful Crib figures attributed to Antonio Rossellini. These figures, the Infant, the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, the ox and the ass, no doubt were fashioned shortly before 1478. Crib construction received its greatest impetus in the eighteenth century, with Naples witnessing the art at its highest level. Not only were hundreds of small terracotta figures used to people the Nativity scene but the procession of the Three Kings, the flocks of the Shepherds and the inn with its surroundings reached heroic proportions. Giuseppe Sammartino (1720-1792) was the outstanding maker of Crib figures in Naples. Celebrano, Somma, Vassallo, De Vito, Mosca and Gori, also belong to the celebrated Neapolitan school of Crib artists. In Sicily it was Matera who was the master. In Portugal this honor goes to Machado de Castro. In Spain, Saltillo stands out beyond all others. Modern Ger-

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