

The makings of Christmas

'Who can wonder that Christmas contains incongruous elements, for old things, loved by the people, cannot easily be uprooted.'

Clement A. Miles
Christmas in Ritual and Tradition

By Emily Morrison

The timing seems appropriate, at the close of this year of ritualistic fanfare surrounding the refurbishment of the Statue of Liberty, to consider the nature of our American holiday celebrations. A footloose amalgam of ethnic tribes and subcultures, we nevertheless seem to conspire on festive occasions to rejoice as a more or less unified whole.

What ingredients add spice and significance to the "melting pot" of our holiday celebrations — the most widely observed of which is undoubtedly Christmas?

Religion, of course, plays a vital role in many of our holiday observances, from Thanksgiving to Hanukkah, from Easter to Epiphany to Halloween, which has its roots in pagan ritual yet ends with the chastening dawn of All Saints' Day. Christmas as well has pagan origins — and, like ancient Romans celebrating the pagan Saturnalia, we're often criticized for the overindulgence with which we revel in the holiday season.

Americans, on the whole, are an excessive lot. We tend to eat too much, drink too much, and spend lavishly on Christmas gifts and festive trappings. For the affluent among us, the brimming cornucopia of our pioneer heritage spills over into a harvest of holiday plenty that often translates into conspicuous consumption.

Yet our country is a land of contrasts. In the midst of this apparent embarrassment of riches, we have single parents on welfare, senior citizens and minorities living on the fringes of an abundant society, a substantial underclass we call "the working poor," and homeless people sleeping on steam vents and setting up housekeeping in packing crates.

Charges that we've taken the Christ out of Christmas may well be valid. Spend any Saturday afternoon between Thanksgiving and Christmas at the neighborhood shopping mall, and you'll get the picture. Our children, deluged by television advertising, clamor for talking teddy bears, Laser Tag, Evil Horde Slime Pits and electronic war games that masquerade as IBM-compatible "flight simulators" (one of which includes a brilliant tactical maneuver entitled "Libyan Mission"). We mob the malls, declaring ourselves in cahoots with Santa Claus, that universal symbol of secular booty, patterned after a Catholic bishop long forgotten in the shuffle of however many godforsaken shopping days are left until Christmas.

Somewhere in the long centuries that have elapsed since the Christian celebration of the Nativity had its inception in the fourth century B.C., we've lost our perspective on how our modern celebration of Christmas came to be. The journey to regain it needn't necessarily be

morose, however — at least not in the opinion of Clement A. Miles, the author of a volume entitled *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*, published in England in 1912.

Although he made it clear that, by most scholarly accounts, the observation of Christmas on December 25 had its origins primarily in pre-Christian ritual and the celebration of the secular New Year, this stolid Briton credited Catholicism with much of the enduring spirit of the Christmas that has survived until the present day.

"In the countries that remained Roman Catholic much of the old Christmas continued, though the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, faced by the challenge of Protestantism, made for greater respectability, and often robbed the Catholic Christmas of its humor, its homeliness, its truly popular stamp, substituting pretentiousness for simplicity, sugary sentiment for naive and genuine poetry," wrote Clement in his introduction.

This joyous, warm and human celebration of Christmas, of course, evolved over the centuries from the austere ethic of the early Christian monks, who deplored the visibly pagan elements inherited from life-affirming winter solstice rituals of newly converted barbarian peoples.

"(T)he Church authorities fought tooth and nail against these relics of heathenism, these devilish rites," wrote Clement, "but mankind's instinctive paganism is insuppressible, the practices continue as ritual, though losing much of their meaning, and the Church, weary of denouncing, comes to wink at them, while the pagan joy in earthly life begins to color her own festival."

The battle apparently rages on in some quarters. The recent controversy surrounding the New Jersey priest who disparaged Santa Claus before schoolchildren might have been circumvented if the undoubtedly well-intentioned cleric had only come across the Italian Christmas legend of the Befana, a female Santa who comes down the chimney on the feast of Epiphany.

La Befana, it appears, was something of a procrastinator. According to legend, she heard the news of Christ's birth from the shepherds on Christmas Day, but delayed embarking on her journey to see Him. Ever since, the poor woman has wandered from house to house searching for the Christ Child. The gifts she leaves, rather than being tokens of rampant secular commercialism, are really intended for Baby Jesus, whom the Befana reasons might well be inside any of the houses on her eternally unfinished route.

Ungrateful American *bambini* afflicted with what a recent Democrat and Chronicle article termed the Christmas "gimmies" might be cured by a turn at the Urn of Fate. A great round decorative bowl filled to capacity with gaily wrapped presents, the Urn in actuality contains a number of empty boxes mixed in with the authentic gifts. A child who has thrown tantrums over insecticons might well reach in and draw a blank from this intriguing Mediterranean diversion.



MOTHER AND CHILD — This painting of the "Virgin and Child with Four Angels" is by Gerard David, a 15th-century Flemish painter. It is part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Few children, however, are really immune to the altruistic spirit that seems to imbue our Christmas traditions, despite the continuous bombardment of media-induced materialism. Concerned recently that my seven-year-old son's Christmas list was growing a trifle long and the thrill of getting might perhaps come to eclipse the spirit of giving, I didactically parcelled out a dollar for him to deposit in the Salvation Army kettle at Midtown Plaza.

Later, as we skirted the gathering hordes waiting to ride the Monorail, he informed me that if he were to discover a million dollars on the floor of B. Forman's, he'd follow the sound of that incessantly ringing bell until he found the Salvation Army volunteer once more, and turn the cash over to him.

Would I have said the same?

Continued on Page 5

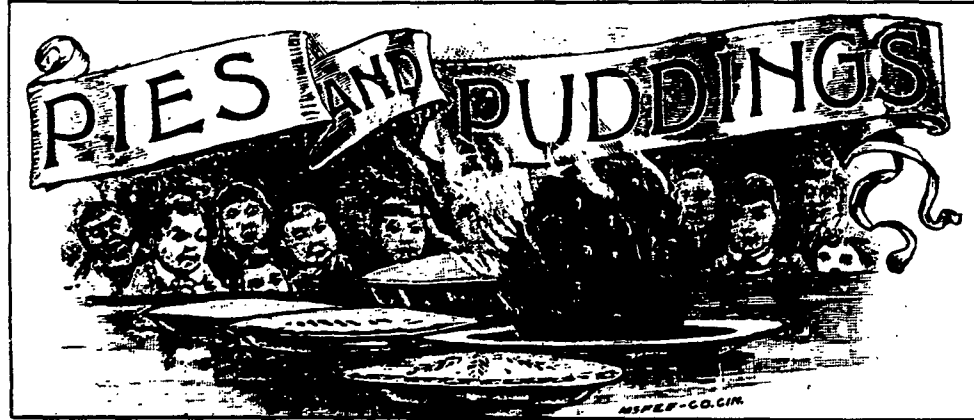
Family feasts for a festive season

By Patricia A. McCabe

The season of rejoicing in the birth of Christ has long been marked by traditional feasting and merrymaking. Through the centuries, Yuletide dishes have evolved concurrent with improvements in cooking methods, resulting in some curious *new* traditions. But perhaps it is a desire for nostalgia — a glimpse of our ancestors' days, when life seemed less complicated — that causes us to hold dear to the old favorites.

All around the globe this year, many people will be celebrating Christmas as their ancestors did. In parts of western Europe, families will join other families for the long, cold walk down snowy mountain trails or across frozen lakes, carrying lighted candles or lanterns to midnight Mass. On Christmas day, they continue to observe the familial meal, as did generations before them.

In Poland, the head of the family will break off a piece of "oplatki," a flour-and-water wafer stamped with a figure, and pass it on to another family member, bestowing peaceful wishes upon the recipient. These wafers, blessed by the parish priest, are made



by local monks and delivered to families to send with letters to relations, much in the same way we send Christmas cards. In Italy, "panettone," or currant loaf, is a no-knead coffee cake usually given as a gift.

Perhaps the most familiar traditions to Americans are plum pudding and the wassail bowl. Anyone who has enjoyed Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" will remember the pudding "... like a speckled cannon ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quarter of lighted brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top."

In Shakespeare's time, plum pudding was

served in a semiliquid state. Charles II was the first to see a more solid version, which was wrapped in a cloth and boiled. It wasn't until Victorian days that the idea of a steaming vessel was realized, and plum pudding became cake-like as we now know it (served with brandied buttercream, or "hard sauce," of course!).

The Wassail — from the Anglo-Saxon *wes-hal*, "to be whole" — was and still is a traditional toasting punch. It is theorized that the drinking of the Wassail was a communion of sorts; by consuming the punch, one would perform the rite for the welfare of another

person and to benefit the partaker. In early English caroling, wassailing was practiced by going to homes of the wealthier neighbors with cup or bowl in hand, in the expectation that the neighbors would fill the vessel with punch. Sometimes the bowl was adorned with ribbons and topped with baked apples called "lambswool."

For your holiday enjoyment, a recipe for wassail follows. It should be noted that wassail is best consumed hot.

Wassail with "lambswool"

Core and bake: 1 dozen apples
Combine in a saucepan and boil for 5 minutes: 1 cup water, 4 cups sugar, 1 tablespoon grated nutmeg, 2 teaspoons ground ginger, 1/2 teaspoon mace, 6 whole cloves, 6 allspice berries, 1 stick cinnamon
Beat until stiff but not dry: 1 dozen egg whites

Beat separately until light in color: 1 dozen egg yolks
Fold whites into yolks, using a large bowl. Strain sugar and spice mixture into eggs, combining quickly.

Bring almost to the boiling point separately: 4 bottles sherry, 2 cups brandy
Incorporate the hot wine with the spice and egg mix, beginning slowly and stirring briskly with each addition. Toward the end of this process add the brandy. Just before serving, and while the mix is still foaming, add the baked apples.