

CELEBRATING THE YULETIDE

By Lorraine Payette

Winter in Canada brings snow and warm clothing, bright lights and decorations, good feelings toward our fellow people. Many in our area celebrate holy days each December, and you may be surprised to learn that many of the traditions used in the celebrations come from a common background.

While most of us are familiar with Judaism (the December holiday being Chanukah, starting each year on the 25th day of Kislev in the Jewish calendar) and Christianity (Christmas, celebrated by most in our area on December 25), the oldest and perhaps least recognized religion is Paganism. Though not well known in modern society, signs of this faith may be seen everywhere throughout the months leading up into January.

Perhaps one of the most ancient of sacred observances, the winter solstice has been celebrated by humans dating into pre-history. The Chinese celebrate it as Dongzhi, the Talmud recognizes it as Tekufat Tevet. Pagans call the holiday Yule, and many of its traditions are well known. The date varies as the winter solstice officially falls when the North Pole is tilted 23.5° from the sun, which usually occurs between December 20 and 23. A celebration

of the longest night of the year, it welcomes the returning sun.

In older times, many animals were slaughtered to prevent having to maintain them through the winter, making meat plentiful at Yuletide. A large log known as the Yule Log would be burned to provide continuous warmth and light during the celebrations. The feasting lasted twelve days.

To honour the deities (often referred to as the Lord and the Lady, and having equal but different powers), greenery would be brought into homes and used as decorations. Wreaths of holly would be placed upon the doors, mistletoe hung in the middle of the ceiling. Garlands of pine boughs and other evergreens would be hung for all to see, and a tree would be placed in a central point in the home. Ornaments would be placed upon the tree, usually made of natural things like pinecones and nuts, pieces of fruit, strings of berries and other cheerful items, and lights added in the form of candles to push back the darkness. Gifts brought by elves, gnomes or witches could also be placed among the branches or under the tree to share its fruitfulness with all.

Songs were sung to make the season more festive. Carols such as “Deck the Halls”, “The Boar’s Head Carol”, and “The Twelve Days of Christmas” all refer back to ancient Yuletide celebrations. Roaming bands of carolers would go from house to house indulging in wassail (a warm alcoholic beverage made from spices, fruits and mead, sherry, port or other wines) and companionship. They would carry lanterns with them, bringing the promise of returning light wherever they went.

Feasting for the event was always of greatest importance. Not only were many kinds of roasts available, but other favourites included sweet treats such as fruitcakes, plum and figgy puddings with hard sauce, and fudge-like candies made from fruits, honey and spices like ginger, cinnamon and cloves.

Many of these traditions are now fully accepted as part of Christmas or Chanukah celebrations. Their presence has been with us longer than we can remember but they all mean the same thing – have a warm and blessed holiday season, whatever faith you practice.

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Below: Wreaths of holly and other greenery are hung on many doors

Middle: Whether inside or out, a decorated, well lit tree is a popular symbol of the season.

Right: Wreath shaped coffee cakes decorated with fruit and nuts are welcome at Yuletide

Right Middle: A festive fruitcake decorated for the season

Bottom Right: Dark, rich, and mysterious, a steamed figgy pudding served with hard sauce is always a hit

