



Above: When tulips appear each spring in the area, it is a reminder of the gifts of tulip bulbs that were given to Canada in thankfulness for the Liberation of the Netherlands almost 75 years ago.

Top Right: Many Dutch Canadians continue to place their shoes out on the hearth on Dec. 5th with a treat for Sinterklaas and his horse.



SINTERKLAAS DAY: A Dutch Tradition Comes to Canada

By Sally Smid

As the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Holland at the end of WWII approaches, the great number of Dutch Canadians who are thankful for Canada's role in that event becomes perhaps even more evident. It seems that many came to Canada, in part, due to an admiration for their Canadians liberators.

Dutch culture has become woven into the traditions of our country. **Sinterklaas Day is celebrated on Dec. 5th** in a variety of ways in Canada. Traditionally, in the Netherlands, Sinterklaas arrives in mid-November by boat from his home in Spain.

Sinterklaas, also known as Saint Nicholas, has a long white beard and is dressed like a bishop. He wears a red cape and a tall red and gold head dress. In one hand he carries a staff, in the other a book of names with notes about each child's behavior for the past year. The elderly saint, with the long white beard is stern and dignified, unlike the fat and jolly Santa Claus we envision here in Canada. Children place their shoes by the door at night and Sinterklaas rides through town on his white horse Amerigo and places little treats or gifts in the children's shoes, assisted by his helpers, the Peters.

Children often leave a carrot for the horse and a glass of milk for Sinterklaas and his helpers, who fill their shoes with traditional sweets, like spiced biscuits, marzipan and chocolate letters.

The original Saint Nicholas was a Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor during the first half of the fourth century. By the late middle ages,

his death on the 6th of December, was commemorated annually. Legend has it that St Nicholas came back to earth with gifts for all deserving children and punishment for the rest by leaving coal or "a birch switch for parental use". Zwarte Piet, Black Peter, was Saint Nicholas' Moorish servant. In recent years he has been quite controversial. Many who have grown up with this tradition insist that there is no racism involved and that Piet's face is blackened with soot from entering houses through the chimneys.

Sinterklaas Day is one of fun and gifts, while Christmas Day is a religious holiday that includes a church service and a time to commemorate the birth of Christ, which seems to help distinguish the true meaning of the holiday in many ways. It is interesting to find that many second and third generation Dutch Canadian descendants still continue the tradition of Sinterklaas and "put out their shoes" and receive gifts on Dec. 6th.

Santa Claus, in some fashion, is the most universally recognized figure in the world and has been adopted into many different cultures. In France he is Pere Noel, in the United Kingdom he is Father Christmas, and celebrated in Germany he is Weihnachtsmann, the Christmas Man. Japan knows him as Hoteiosho, a God, bearing gifts, and in Norway he is Julenissen or the Christmas Gnome.

Holland's Sinterklaas is similar, as he too, is a figure who brings presents. He has become a cultural tradition for many who still embrace their Dutch Heritage while enjoying the many privileges of living in Canada! **LH**



"Sinterklaas" appeared in the Athens Parade of Lights several years ago to the delight of many local Dutch Canadians.