

Heureaux Noel. . .

As a very young child growing up in New Orleans I spent, for whatever reasons, much of my time in the household of four generations. It was that of my Great-grandmother, Grandmere, and one of her daughters, Amelie, better known as "Tati" to all of the extended family, and me. During these very early years we always spent Christmas in the little shotgun cottage near Audubon Park. These were the years before my younger brother and sister were born.

Grandmere had been born on her family's plantation in West Baton Rouge parish across the Mississippi River from the city of the same name. She grew up in the years prior to, and during, the years of The War between the States. As a result she had many stories to tell of life on a large plantation. Unfortunately no one undertook the task of recording them. I do, if somewhat vaguely, now have snips of memory of some of them. However my opinion of memory being what it is, I swear to the accuracy of none of these tales. It

reinforces my opinion of eyewitness accounts and the like, that is to say, they are of little value.

That being said, I seem to recall her references to Christmas in French-speaking Louisiana of the mid-nineteenth century. My recollection is that to some extent the multi-generational household maintained a bit of the older traditions. And indeed, in Creole New Orleans, below Canal Street, it was still very much that way: Christmas Day being strictly one of religious devotion with the real celebration and exchange of gifts taking place on New Year's Day. As you might imagine the forms of holiday observance changed through the years. The early French settlers of La Nouvelle Orleans hacked a clearing on the banks of the Mississippi River in 1718. One of the first buildings to be erected was a small crude church of logs chinked with mud and roofed with palmetto leaves. Beyond the clearing was a dark wilderness where frogs croaked and alligators roared. The village was but eight months old. The only other buildings were a barracks, one house and a warehouse, all of similar construction.

On Christmas Eve of 1718 a religious service was held to give thanks, probably for still being alive. The worshipers were all men with their weapons at their side. It is recorded that rain fell on Christmas Eve. In this crude building and forbidding setting at midnight, a Catholic priest, whose name does not survive in the records, celebrated in glittering vestments, New Orleans' first Messe de Minuit at a little altar protected by an attached roof. The church stood on a site near that of the present day St. Louis Cathedral in which a Midnight Mass is still held each year. Amid the flickering altar candles were tiny figures of The Christ Child flanked by the Virgin and Joseph. The men kneeled and rejoiced:

"Heureaux Noel, Joyeaux Noel". The names of all of the fifty are not known, but the founder of the Colony of Louisiana, Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de

Bienville, was present, as were Le Page du Pratz, the first historian of the city, Adrien de Pauger, an engineer who laid out the street plan. Others had names still found on the census rolls of the present city, including that of one Pailloux who was the first man after Bienville to build his own house.

On Christmas day the men did not labor at clearing the swamp from which the city would one day rise. It was truly a thanksgiving celebration, for the woods were full of game, the waters abounded in fish, oysters and crab. Only a few days before, the ship Neptune from France had unloaded great casks of wine and brandy. But who knew if they would survive for another year.

As time went on, the Christmas Observance was that of France, with the mainly religious devotions taking place on Christmas Day and the major celebration taking place on New Year's Day. The season between the holidays became one of revelry, with balls, parties and feasting. Even so it remained one in which the family was the center. Homes were decorated primarily with edibles such as fruits and nuts, which were piled into pyramids as table centerpieces and combined with evergreens and ivy decorations. Later, spicy and sweet smelling pomanders of cloves, cinnamon, violet thyme, catmint and coriander, were strung through the house. Swags, constructed of gilded leaves and fresh preserved flowers were added. Christmas trees were largely unknown until the mid-eighteen forties and then decorated with small gifts and trinkets for the family. Part of the tradition was to keep the tree hidden until Christmas morning. The holiday opened with a lengthy Midnight Mass for the Creoles at the St. Louis Cathedral. The Mass later was followed by a reveillion, a late night supper that might continue until nearly dawn.

After a few hours sleep, a light breakfast would be served followed by bringing in the tree. The children who were not taken to Midnight Mass were

present. Following that they went to church to see the crèche and pray to le Petit Jesus. The remainder of the day was spent with family and close friends, the adults might nap. As gift-giving was to take place on New Year, this was the beginning of the shopping season for presents. In time some larger social events might be held in the evenings.

New Year's was the big day. Early that morning was, particularly for the children, a most exciting time. Lyle Saxon, in his book on Louisiana lore "Gumbo Ya-Ya", described it: "Early in the morning each child presented his or her parent a compliment de jour, a brief verse written of course in French. A typical verse that survives, in translation is as follows:

"My dear Papa, my dear Mama,
I wish you a happy and prosperous New Year
I will be a good little boy
I will not tease my little sister any more
I love you with all my heart."

The custom found its way into the American sector of New Orleans, for I recently found this note written by my Grandfather, aged 10 years, to his parents:

New Orleans, 1st Jan 1864

My Dearest Parents,

We are today, ushered into the experience of new joys, new cares and, no doubt, new trials, for we are entering upon a new field of labor: the time past has gone, never to be recalled.

I own that I have not valued, as I should have done, your love and watchful care of me, and that I have not heeded your instructions as I ought to have done; but I hope you will forgive me for the past, and pray to God to help me to turn over a new leaf in 1864; that it may not be blemished with misdeeds, but that it may be seen in all my ways, that I try to keep the record pure and stainless.

With earnest wishes for your happiness and that God will long save you to bless your children, I remain

Your affectionate son,

S.A. Trufant

They received their gifts, better than the trinkets which had been in their Christmas stockings. The ceremony was followed by a big breakfast of several different meats, always grillades, grits, black-eyed peas and pain perdu. Then the family went visiting. The first visits were always to the grandmothers, then the aunts, the godmothers and godfathers and perhaps other relatives. At each stop gifts were exchanged.

Among the up-river plantations it became customary to light tee-pee shaped bonfires of logs, cane reeds and bamboo. There are various explanations of the origins of the custom. Some insisted that the feu-de-joie were to guide Pere Noel to the chimneys of the rural homes or parishioners to Midnight Mass. Field-hands were traditionally given 3-6 days off during the holiday season and might be given passes to visit neighboring plantations, or might take the opportunity for weddings or to attend festivities provided by the owners. House servants were given Christmas Eve for themselves.

It is said that Christmas 1859, just before the war was the grandest ever. New Orleans was the third city to develop gas lighting in homes and shops so that window displays were brilliantly elaborate. The Daily Picayune described the "tempting profusion of riches, with gifts up to \$2000". It went on to say: The appearance of our variety stores has been more brilliant than we have ever known them to be. . . These tempting bazaars are crowded all day and night by ladies and children, and a goodly number of the stern sex, who are performing the solemn duty of purchasing Christmas gifts". The paper that year was the largest printed in the South and West. By Christmas Eve of 1861, after eight months of war, it had shrunk to four

pages. It carried a feature ending with an appeal for the "poor and suffering and our brave soldiers in the field". A further observation noted that generally the cheapest articles were in greater demand than on any previous Christmas Eve. Four months later the city fell to the Union forces. From that time on until 1877, the city was under Federal domination which continued through the years of war and reconstruction. The city underwent recovery, but at a slow pace, until the late nineteenth century when the Christmas focus, especially in the American sector above Canal Street, found the major celebration being held on Christmas Day and to the season were added elaborate decorations, dinners and occasional large balls during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. In my teenage days came the parade and sports activities, culminating in the Sugar Bowl Game.

More recently with the rise of tourism some of the old customs have been revived, and to a degree changed. Reveillon for instance, which was originally limited to the hours after Midnight Mass, has been extended by restaurants from the evenings of a few days before Christmas and ending in the elaborate feasts of New Year's Eve. The bonfires on the levees now extend up and down the river to such an extent that the river boats make cruises for tourists to view them from the comfort of the decks with ample bars and buffet tables. On Christmas Eve there is caroling in Jackson Square in front of the Cathedral, making it necessary for the Cathedral parishioners to have special passes for attending Mass. The Sugar Bowl has essentially been taken over by the computer rankings and the television industry so that it might not be played on New Year's Day.

Commercial tourism has disrupted the quiet of my childhood.

Samuel A. Trufant
