Reminiscence
A Cajun Christmas and New Year's Day in Breaux Bridge

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an interview held with Miss Jeanne Castille, a native Acadian of Breaux Bridge and former French teacher who, all her life, has dedicated her efforts to the preservation of Louisiana's French heritage. Miss Castille describes the traditional customs practiced in the Breaux Bridge area during her youth on Christmas and New Year Day.

Louisiane: Have you lived in Breaux Bridge all your life?

Castille: Yes. My life. I was born in this house, which was my grandfather's. I was born in 1910, so I'm 71.

L.: Do you know of any traditional Cajun customs practiced during the Christmas season?

C.: Well, this will have to be described from a personal viewpoint, because Christmas was celebrated differently in various parts of Acadiana. For instance, I have never heard of having bonfires on the levee, because we didn't have levees here at the time. What I will tell you will be my own experience during the holiday, and the time period will be between 1910 and 1920, which was during my childhood.

For us, Christmas was really a religious holiday. We would speak about Noël, la fête de Noël, as a religious festival. Everybody would go to mass. And, for us, the children - what gave us a thrill was to visit the crèche (the manger) which was always in the church.

However, our parents had kept the custom of St-Nicholas bearing gifts. Christmas Eve, we hung our stockings by the fireplace and waited for St-Nicholas. This was a custom which we borrowed from our forefathers, and was not like the contemporary gift-exchanging ritual. The gift was, in this part of Louisiana, usually an apple, an orange, or some candies, and always pétards (firecrackers) in pretty red wrapping. We always received pétards during the Christmas holidays, but not on July 4th. And these were the only gifts St-Nicholas brought us. We were always told to be good, because if we were not, St-Nicholas would not bring us anything. So, on était très sage.

The next day was a family day - not the extended family - just the immediate family - and the immediate one was there. We attended Mass; our parents would take us to the Manger. Then we would come home and enjoy a festive dinner. It always included oysters and what we call farce, mixed with rice. Turkey was not common; we had chicken or goose as main dish. Et puis le soir, à la nuit tombante, on tenait un petit brin de fraise du foyer et on allait en dehors et on tirait des pétards, on allumait des étincelles. It was much cheaper for us to take the glowing embers from the fireplace than to use matches.

Later on, when more and more Américains moved here (we were all Americans, but we still considered ourselves French in those days), they introduced the idea of the Christmas tree. Et moi, je ne vais jamais oublier la première fois que nous avons eu ici ce qu'on appelle l'arbre de Noël. C'était pour Christmas. En français, la fête religieuse c'était Noël, mais la fête célébrée, pas religieuse, c'était Christmas. Et bien, nous avons eu un petit arbre; mon père avait coupé un petit chêne dans le cote et on l'avait mis dans ce qu'on appelait ici un «cane», a can which was formerly used to hold syrup. Et puis on avait décoré l'arbre avec un peu de mousse verte. Et aussi on avait un filet de tissu. Parfois, on pourrait faire tout de même un mouchoir en feutre. We used to ask each other, «Ce que veulent-ils?» A St-Martinville, c'était le petit bonhomme Janvier qui apportait des cadeaux, mais ici on parlait de St-Nicholas or on parlait de nos cadeaux comme des étrennes. But we also hung our stockings, as we did during Christmas and we again received fruit or «petards». But each child had a gift - a doll, a little chest of drawers, sometimes a home-made firecracker made out of wood, with grains of powder inside the wooden shell. But we only received one gift because it was expensive.

L.: Est-ce qu'il y avait un véritable échange de cadeaux entre parents et enfants?

C.: Non. Pas chez nous autres, parce qu'il aurait fallu que les parents nous donnent de l'argent pour pouvoir acheter des cadeaux. Plus tard, quand on était plus âgé et on avait plus d'argent, on donnait peut-être un mouchoir ou une boîte de bonbons. Aussi, le Jour de l'An, c'était le jour de la famille, mais la dame de grande famille. On exigeait que les enfants aillent voir leurs parents. Sinon, il fallait écrire une lettre donnant une explication pourquoi on ne pouvait pas rendre visite. J'ai retrouvé une lettre qu'un de mes frères avait écrit à sa mère. Il habitait à trois milles dîci. Voici ce qu'il avait écrit: «A Papa et Maman et toute la famille; C'est le devoir d'un fils à son père et à sa mère d'aller leur souhaiter la bonne année. Mais comme j'ai un devoir et aussi une vie à gagner, je vous m'excuse si je ne puis aller vous souhaiter la bonne année moi-même et tous les bonheurs qu'un fils peut souhaiter à son père et à sa mère et aussi à toute la famille. Et... je pense bien que vous sympathiserez avec moi. Je reste comme toujours votre dévoué fils, René.»

C'était écrit en 1901. Ça montre qu'on exigeait que les enfants viennent souhaiter la bonne année.

Le Jour de l'An, on se visitait et on se servait des liqueurs, généralement faîtes à la maison. Ce jour-là, il y avait un grand dîner à la maison, plus grand que le dîner de «Christmas. On avait de la farce, avec des huitres ou des homards, et les autres spécialités de la région. Il y avait du poulet à la sauce piquante et des gâteaux pour le dessert.

Quand j'étais «teenager», je suis allé voir des centaines de familles le Jour de l'An et nous avons eu des liqueurs, du vin ou des gâteaux. A minuit, on allait visiter le père de la paroisse qui venait de la France. Il faisait très froid à cette époque - vous voyez, le temps maintenant n'est pas aussi froid - et il nous donnait un vin chaud. Ma grande mère (peut-être 10 ou 12 amis) y allait. When I was 8 or 9, we didn't have paved roads, they were gravel roads, which were often muddy, so we didn't go to the midnight Mass. By the time I was 12 or so, the road conditions were better, so we could go to the midnight Mass. We had to go to church half an hour before the Mass. It was so crowded that, in Breaux Bridge, they had to have some kind of paging so people would not become too restless.

When we were young, the masses were mostly sung in Latin. But later, they had pageants, certain songs, such as Si Maudit Christien, «Sainte Nuits» and others, were sung in French.

L.: In summary, then, would you say that Christmas was more of a religious holiday than was New Year's Day?

C.: Yes! New Year's Day was not considered as religious as Christmas was. But, as time went by, Christmas became a question of the Christmas tree and Santa Claus, a person who brings gifts, but has no religious significance at all. Although it has become more materialistic, even in our area, the majority of Cajuns still would not miss the Christmas Mass.

Ms. Castille's house in Breaux Bridge, which was originally built by her grandfather.