Cajun traditions abound at the Acadian Village

This is the first in a series of reports from our local tourist attraction, Acadian Village. For anyone unfamiliar with the Village, it is an 11 acre landscaped site, located off West Broussard Road, that serves as a replica of an Acadian settlement of the 1800’s. Six authentic structures were moved here from the local region and furnished with antiques of the period. Three other buildings were constructed on site; the general store, the chapel, and the blacksmith shop. In time, we will “visit” all these homes. You will be given a step-by-step description of each house along with its artifacts. You will also be kept abreast of the latest events occurring at the village. From time to time, a lesson in Cajun history will be apropos. When appropriate the trees and medicinal plants important to the early Cajuns will be presented.

In this first installment I thought I would present some of the earlier New Year traditions. Jour de l’an (New Year’s Day) as it is called, was celebrated a lot differently autrefois (in olden times) by the Cajuns. It was on New Year’s Day that gifts were given, rather than at Christmas (Noël). Christmas was reserved for family and religion. Everyone went to Midnight Mass and then returned home for a big breakfast. The children, most times, were treated to gifts of fruits, such as apples, bananas, and oranges — not by Santa Claus, but by L’Enfant Jesus (the Child Jesus). Christmas marked the beginning of the Holiday Season which reached its culmination on New Year’s Day. That was the day for celebration and gift giving.

The children waited in anticipation for Jan. 1 when the “etrennes” (gifts) were given. Most of the presents were fait a’ la main (handmade) or perhaps merely a shiny nickel or dime. Depending on where you live, the person who supposedly brought these gifts, varied from place to place. In some areas it is believed that the gift bearer was “Petit Bonhomme Janvier” (the little January man), while elsewhere it (stuffed stomach of a young hog), store-bought bread, country butter, winter vegetables, baked sweet potatoes, wine, ambrosia and home make cakes for desert, followed by the usual demitasse of pure black coffee made from home roasted beans. The children and visitors could always count on an abundant supply of pecan and bine (sesame) pralines and popcorn balls.

In the Cajun tradition of showing respect for the elders, the families visited the married children and their families, the marraines and parrains (god-mothers and godfathers) of each of their children. Aunts and uncles were also visited, with “grandpere et grandmere” (grandfather and grandmother) never left out. The family then returned home to await friends and relatives who dropped in during the day to extend good wishes for “La Nouvelle Annee” (the New Year) and to drink a cup of black coffee or to drink toasts to the New Year. The jug of whiskey and bottles of homemade cherry bounce were repeatedly used for the many New Year toasts.

Another custom in some locales was the resolving of all family and friendly differences or disagreements. This was the time to embrace and forget and forgive grievances. Many believed that whatever you did on New Year’s Day, you would do the rest of the year. So if you fight, you will fight, all year; if you wash clothes you will wash all year, etc.

Many Cajuns still observe special traditions for New Year’s Day. Two special dishes for dinner are black eyed peas, eaten for good health during the year, and cabbage; for wealth. While for most the time for gift giving is Christmas, a few families still honor the age old practice of the “etrennes” and for most Cajuns big dinners, drinking and toasts, and visiting are still the order of the day.

Next time, Courir du Mardi Gras.