Christmas in Louisiana is Different and Distinctive

Christmas in Louisiana has a long and colorful history, stretching back to the earliest settlements here—the founding of Natchitoches in 1714 and, four years later, the establishment of New Orleans.

In 1718, Christmas was celebrated by Sieur de Bienville and his band of half-a-hundred French and Canadians on the Louisiana lowlands along Bayou St. John and near the Mississippi River. Within a small frame church in the heart of the eight-month-old village of La Nouvelle Orleans, pine knots were being burned to illuminate the interior of the rude chapel. Unkempt trappers, coureurs des bois, weary traders, a few sailors and a score of soldierly gathering inside and knelt toward a primitively constructed altar.

Across the marshlands rang the solemn notes of a bell. It was Midnight Mass, ushering in the first Christmas Day of record in Louisiana. With its French Catholicism, it was a day that would shape the tone for future Christmas observances and traditions for generations to come, adding an exotic flavor and a special uniqueness to Christmas “a la Louisianaise.”

Today more than two and a half centuries later, the towering State Capitol Building stands as the apogee of all Louisianas Christmas greetings and traditions. Although no living tree, the 450-foot high, 34-story Capitol is decorated each December with a myriad of lights. Thus Louisianas seat of government is transformed into what may well be the worlds (and certainly Louisianas) tall test Christmas decoration.

The contrast between the first manifestation of the Christmas spirit in the Bayou State and todays largest Christmas symbol in Louisiana is striking indeed—one more reason why Christmas in Louisiana is like Christmas nowhere else.

Between that first Christmas at New Orleans and todays splendid decoration of the State Capitol, many seasonal traditions have stamped Louisianas Christmas with rare distinction.

In Acadiana, the French-speaking habitants find a particular joy in Christmas—with midnight masses and revellions, with family gatherings where stories are recounted from the past for the benefit of younger generations. One such folkloric tale is that on Christmas Eve, the animals speak. Animals have such a gift, according to the Acadians, because cattle breathed upon the Christ child to keep Him warm in his manger. At midnight, they say, the animals kneel and turn their heads toward Bethlehem. This concept is not far removed from early Louisiana Indian lore, which claimed, that on Christmas Eve, even the deer were wont to kneel and look up to the Great Spirit.

Another singular Louisianas Christmas tradition still exists along the Old River Road between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Along the levee, river folk gather up sugar cane reeds, scrap lumber and twigs, which they pile atop the levee barrier to build a fire instead of lighting a tree. When set afire on Christmas Eve, many bonfires, stretching for some forty miles from the Sunshine Bridge below Baton Rouge southward to the Lutcher-Gramercy area, illuminate the sky and reflect in the still waters of the Mississippi River.

Christmas celebrations take on a Teutonic touch at the small community of Roberts Cove, in Southwest Louisiana near Crowley. Settled in 1890s by German immigrants, the town and area observe a time-honored custom of greeting St. Nicholas for well-behaved children, and Little Black Peter for the disobedient small fry. The occasion is the eve of the Feast Day of St. Nicholas, this year on December 5. Roberts Cove residents, therefore, observe two Christmas celebrations.

Christmas comes with a shrimp boat at Morgan City. The citys year round symbol is a shrimp boat, permanently set in the neutral ground of the main street. This monument, designated Spirit of Morgan City, is transformed at Yuletide into a fantastic fairyland boat—trumped with a thousand lights and decorated with reindeer and a giant Santa Claus. For many years the “Spirit of Morgan City” has been the spirit of Christmas in this bustling shrimp and oil center.

Festival of Lights

Christmas is the theme for the magic displays at the R.W. Norton Art Gallery in Shreveport, as it has been for seasons past. The famed collection of 38 exquisite antique dolls, dressed with the fashions of Louisiana from 1790 to 1920, will be shown for the delight of visitors. Other facets of Christmas in this splendid gallery will include contemporary Yule decorations and accessories.

For spectacle and setting, Christmas is unparalleled at Natchitoches, the oldest town in Louisiana. This historic community, as it has for more than four decades, will stage a splendid Christmas Festival Dec. 3. Spectacular lighted displays will illuminate ancient streets, the bridges and banks of lovely Cane River, as some 75,000 witnesses watch a pageant of boats and fireworks. Today it is one of North Louisianas most popular traditions.

At famous Hodges Gardens near Many, in west central Louisiana, a lovely Festival of Lights takes place on Decembers second Saturday, illuminating the floral beds and trails of this scenic wonderland. The gates of the Gardens open at 6 p.m. and visitors may drive, for several hours, with no admission fee, throughout the area.

Across the state at Tallulah, near the Mississippi River, a small but splendid Christmas festival Dec. 2, adds holiday excitement to this river town. Miss Merry Christmas reigns over festivities which include a band concert, parade and a colorful tree-lighting ceremony along the banks of Roundabout Bayou.

From marshland to pine-fringed towns, from bayou communities to river road mansions, all Louisianas keeps Christmas well. Its many Christmas celebrations are observed with warmth and flair and are, like Louisiana itself, colorful, diverse, and unique.

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