CREOLE CHRISTMAS IN LOUISIANA

DINDON DE GUINEE, PAPA NOEL AND OYSTERS

Christmas is as Christmas does—and in Louisiana it takes
on a distinctive flavor, with unusual variations on the original
theme. In many respects Christmas in the Bayou State is like
Christmas nowhere else.

The first Yuletide celebration of record in Louisiana occurred
more than 250 years ago in New Orleans. On that long
ago Christmas Day, New Orleans was only a “chantier,” a
plot of land along Bayou St. John. Here some half-hundred
settlers under the command of Bienville had succeeded in erecting
four buildings in the eight-month-old colony, having overcome
the many vicissitudes of frontier life.

The day before this Christmas was another day of work,
with trees to fell, logs to cut, and cabins to build. Despite these
pressing needs, the 50-odd pioneers took a Christmas break.
Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve was chanted in the primitive-
ly constructed church in the flickering light of pine knots. The
small band of Frenchmen attended dressed in rough cloth
and leather, the Canadians in fringed buckskins and beaver
hats and the soldiers of Bienville in wool with leather jerkins,
steel breastplates and tight metal helmets.

The Christmas Day feast was abundant, even by today's
standards. In a wild and virgin land these “voyageurs”
enjoyed wild grain, venison, duck, quail, oysters, crabs, and
shrimp. There was even wild turkey—“dindon de Guinee”-

For an extra holiday fillip, the tiny colony had played host
only a few days before to a square-rigged ship, the Neptune.
This visiting vessel had docked near the settlement, laden with
wine and brandy from France — goodies from the Motherland.

From this first recorded Christmas, the Yule season in Loui-
siana grew in importance as the province developed into a ter-
ritory and later into a state.

A few years later, in 1721, the Vieux Carre had been established in New Orleans and the colony
had grown to a population of about 500 men, women, children,
slaves and servants. The amenities of town life, however lim-
ited, contrasted pleasantly with the rugged atmosphere of the
very first Louisiana celebration.

SOME LOUISIANANS CELEBRATE Christmas in a unique
way—for several weeks prior to Christmas, “clubs” —
usually groups of children—gather wood, old automobile
tires, and anything that will burn, for the huge Mississippi
River.

Cackling and Crowing as horsemen gallop through the
country side collecting “gifts” for the savory gumbo which
is cooked and served to everyone.

Forty years later in 1768 Louisiana experienced its first
Christmas under Spanish rule. Although Louisiana had, tech-
ically, been Spanish since 1762, it was only after the 1768
revolution of the Creoles against Iberian overlords and the
subsequent occupation by Spanish Governor Alejandro O'Reilly
that Spanish rule was firmly established. Christmas was
celebrated with added Spanish overtones.

The spirit of Christmas had begun to penetrate early set-
tlements all over the state. It was started in Louisiana by the
Creoles, adopted by their country cousins, the Acadians, and
fostered by later Anglo-Saxon settlers of North Louisiana.

In the Creole life of old New Orleans, Christmas was a day
for solemnity, religion and family observance; New Year’s, the
time for conviviality. The holiday season reached its climax
on “le jour de l’an” — New Year’s Day.

The Creole Santa Claus was Papa Noel, who looked like any
other Santa but had the extra graces of his Gallic ancestors.
Almost unknown was the American traditional Yuletide menu of
turkey and cranberries. In New Orleans, Yule tables groaned
with not only Creole dishes but imported wines and preserved
foods from the mother country, France.

Christmas Day and the eve preceding were a time for re-
ligion as Creoles attended church services. It was a day, too,
for families. In New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Donaldsonville,
Thibodaux, Houma as well as other river and bayou towns,
the night before Christmas brought the “messe de minuit” —
Midnight Mass — where all Latin Catholics of South Louisiana
observed their most solemn moments.