**For Happy Noël**

**Delsols Combine French, Vietnamese Customs**

By Pat Courvelle

Lafayette — Imagine a family in which the mother is French Vietnamese and comes from a background of firm Catholic convictions; a father from Toulouse, France, who is deeply devoted to his family; and two adorable little sons. Combine those ingredients and you have the perfect recipe for a family prepared to spend a truly joyful and spiritual Christmas.

Such a family are the Allain Delsols of France. Mr. and Mrs. Delsol and their young sons, Daniel and Christophe, have been in Lafayette since 1970. The young couple are the educational consultants in the Southwest Louisiana area in charge of the “cooperants militaires”: those young French men and women who have elected to come to Louisiana in place of doing military service.

Combining the best of Vietnamese and French traditions and adding a liberal helping of American customs, the Delsols are looking forward to their third Christmas in the United States. Although Christmas is just as important a holiday in France as in America, there are less exterior signs denoting the Yuletide in France, according to Mr. Delsol. Citing an example, the young Parisian claims that if public schools in his country do have Christmas programs, only the secular aspect is involved. The religious side is more personal and left up to the family. However, much emphasis is placed on the crib in Southeastern France. “Our Christmas in France is not quite as commercialized as it is here. It is an extremely sentimental occasion — not so many words are used but much feeling is expressed,” Mr. Delsol reflected about Christmas in his country.

**‘Une Fête Familiale’**

Both he and his wife stressed that Christmas is “vraiment une fête familiale” (truly a family affair type holiday.) And that conveys the meaning of Christmas for the Delsols.

Mrs. Delsol, the former Irene Saint-Pol of Saigon, Vietnam, reiterated her husband’s sentiments about Christmas. “Close relatives — not so much friends — are the important elements at Christmas,” she related. A lovely brunette, Mrs. Delsol recalled some of the Christmases she had spent in her native Saigon. There are actually three categories of Christmas celebrations in Vietnam: those of the Vietnamese Catholics; those of the French; and those celebrated by neither Vietnamese nor French. Celebrations range from the poor man’s Christmas of simply going to midnight Mass to the rich man’s Christmas of elaborate feasting and ornamentation.

Decorating religious statues with lights is the extent of Yule decorating done by the poor. There are no trees, no typical “réveillon après la messe de minuit,” (meal after midnight Mass) or Père Noel, the equivalent to our Santa Claus. But what the poor lack in material symbols of Christmas is more than made up for in their abiding faith.

**Outdoor Masses**

The most beautiful part of Christmas was midnight Mass, sometimes attracting such huge audiences that they were held in the street, according to Mrs. Delsol. Because of the midnight Mass’s beauty and serenity, a large number of non-Catholics augmented the crowd of Catholic worshippers. However, due to the suffering and problems caused by years of war, these gigantic outdoor celebrations are unfortunately no longer a feature of the Vietnamese Christmas, according to Mrs. Delsol. Masses have moved inside, and if anything, the family celebrations have gotten smaller. Yet, the spirit of Christmas has not been dampened.

On the lighter side, many Vietnamese children awaited Papa Noël by placing their shoes beneath the chimney. They know that if they’ve been good, the Papa Noël will leave all sorts of surprises in the shoes. And the Delsol children, Christophe and Daniel, who are quick to tell you that they’ve certainly been good, are already tidying up their shoes to place them under the tree Christmas Eve.

Although well-seasoned travelers, Mr. and Mrs. Delsol found everything new when they arrived in Lafayette in 1970. But gifted with personalities that lend themselves easily to making friends of everyone they meet, the Delsols were soon just as much at home in Acadiana as they had been previously in Saigon, Paris, and Brazil. “We did have problems at first understanding English — especially on the telephone and television.” Mr. Delsol admits. But they have overcome that and are now fluent in English.

**THAT’S THAT I WANT!**

Daniel and Christophe point out to their parents the toys in the catalog they hope Papa Noël will bring this Christmas. The Delsols are preparing to spend their third Christmas in the United States. Mr. Delsol, a native of Southwestern France, and his French Vietnamese wife are the educational consultants in the Southwest Louisiana area in charge of the “cooperants militaires.”

Mr. Delsol admits. But they now speak better English than my husband and I do.” Mrs. Delsol says with a twinkle in her eye. At first six-year-old Daniel refused to even acknowledge English as a language. When his teacher would attempt to coax him into repeating English phrases, he’d simply turn the tables and give her a quick French lesson! Five-year-old Christophe was more fortunate in his English instruction. His teacher was a native Louisianan who spoke French that made for easy communication between student and teacher. Both of the Delsol children attend Montgomery School.