La. Celebration of Christmas
Rich in Custom and Tradition

Bayou Lands Developed Own Rituals

By CLAIRE PUNKEY
(Times-Picayune Bureau)
DONALDSVILLE, La.

The celebration of Christmas in Louisiana is rich in custom and tradition, carrying in its commemoration of the birth of Christ overtones of French, Spanish, German and American cultural influences, along with a smattering of others.

The observance has always centered around the solemnity of a Savior's coming onto the earthly scene, and the Mass of Christmas has always been the focal point of the day since the earliest settlers came to this country.

The bayou lands of Louisiana have developed their own rituals and customs, some of which have faded as newer influences came into the picture, some of which remain in part, some of which continue intact.

This Bayou Lafourche area, where the stream once met the Mississippi River without a barrier of earthworks has its role in Christmas customs. It is at the tip of the long-lived tradition of bonfires on the river levee that now occupies only part of what it once commanded.

PEW PARISHES

The bonfires began as a New Year's Eve event and were spread along all the levee from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, and perhaps beyond that limited stretch of winding high-water protection. Today they extend along the length of only a few parishes on both sides of the river.

Now they herald the coming of Santa Claus as at dusk on the eve of Christmas they are lighted, these giant tepee-looking structures of sugarcane stalks, firewood and other materials.

What was the first celebration of Christmas like in the tiny colony that preceded what is now the state of Louisiana? Bienvenue's small settlement beside Bayou St. John was a scene of construction activity as the day approached.

Christmas Eve found the settlers, about 50 in number, working against winter to finish the building of cabins. But at midnight all gathered in the primitive church they had erected, and by the light provided by burning pine knots they attended Mass.

FEAST IS HELD

There was a feast wrested from the wilds on Christmas Day. The settlers and Bienvenue's soldiers sat down to a meal of venison, quail, duck, crabs, shrimp, oysters and roasted turkey, along with wild grain. Days before the ship Neptune from France had deposited the wine and brandy that graced their rugged table.

This is said to be the first recorded observance of Christmas in Louisiana, when the colony at New Orleans was only eight months old.

By 1721 the rustic atmosphere was giving way to a more cultured observance as the Vieux Carré came into being.

The year 1769 marked the first Christmas with Spanish overtones added.

CUSTOMS ADDED

Along the Mississippi River Coast German settlers added their customs to the celebration, and when the Acadians arrived in this area they put their own distinctive seal on Christmas.

What developed in New Orleans found its way upriver and westward into the bayou settlements, and this was especially true in the emphasis on the family. Papa Noel in time bowed to Santa Claus, but while he prevailed, his role was secondary as a toy deliverer to that of those who distributed these gifts on New Year's Day, then the time of conviviality.

Midnight Mass was followed by a Reveillon, or Christmas Breakfast, and this meant such things as deviled eggs, baked eggs with shrimp, daube glace, French loaf sweet bread with filling of wine, spices, almonds, dates and the like, and many other dishes downed with white, red and dessert wine.

LOCAL CITIZEN

Among customs that prevail is the one in Acadia Parish at a tiny settlement called Robert's Cove where on Dec. 6, the Feast of St. Nicholas, a German citizen dressed as that long-ago Bishop of Myra, visits the homes of children, distributes candies and joins in caroling.

This German custom was brought to Louisiana in the 1800's.

There are many other wonderful observances in Louisiana at and around Christmas, such as the festival in Natchitoches, oldest town in the Louisiana Purchase Territory, with spectacular events on the waters of Cane River and a tremendous fireworks display.

And no Christmas story of the Pelican state can omit the Bayou de La Fourche Christmas celebration of some years ago that had to come in February because the trappers, with a 90-day season limiting their work, were on some remote marsh spot on a houseboat on Christmas Day, taking care of their labors. Today transportation permits Christmas for them on the designated date of observance.

This is a brief panorama of Christmas past and Christmas present in Louisiana.