

KHC

Kristi's Heritage Corner
Kristi Johnson brings life to
Calgary's Hidden Heritage Gems.

A Chinook Country Christmas

In researching for this article, I had the opportunity to read many recollections of the Christmas season from those living in Alberta during the 1800s and 1900s, and it has been an entertaining history lesson. Of the many stories I have read, sacrifice, perseverance, creativity and resourcefulness were all running themes. It was undoubtedly these traits which enabled the settlers to cope with the holidays and even create new traditions.

For the early settlers of Calgary, getting a Christmas tree was no easy task. One ingenious Sarcee brave, known as Foxtail, realized the demand for the product and took it upon himself to harvest trees from the reservation and bring them on sleigh into town each year. His ample supply and reasonable prices soon made him famous around the settlement, and he became known as The Christmas Tree King. Unfortunately



this lucrative venture was not to last for Foxtail, and soon he was driven out of business by competitors.

The Christmas tree, for any family that could acquire one, was a big event. Trees were often strewn with homemade decorations such as candy, popcorn and paper garlands. Bill Frederick recalls that after New Years his mother would make good use of the treats that

decorated the tree by putting them into his lunches. Apparently she could make them last through the whole month of January! He also remembers one year in 1939 when the family opted to light the Christmas tree with light bulbs. Bill's family was only able to acquire 6 bulbs, and without electricity in the house they had to use a wet cell car battery. In an effort to comply with esthetics, they hid the battery at the back to the tree next to the Japanese oranges.

For those families that were able to give gifts, they were often home made and usually of a practical nature. Knitted sweaters were popular, as were monogrammed handkerchiefs and tea towels made from bleached sugar sacks. In another anecdote from Bill Frederick, he explained how his parents liked to have the family tie the presents to the branches of the tree. In his words, "This made me angry as it delayed things considerably." One year, his enthusiasm got the better of his size and he fell into the tree while reaching for a present that was far out of his reach. It turned out that the gift wasn't even for him.

Not everyone who came to the prairies at this time brought their families with them. In fact, many of those who

immigrated here were single men. As such, Christmas was often a very lonely time. There is a story of a railway officer who was feeling particularly forlorn about being without family for the holidays. On Christmas Eve, he ventured out into town and bought himself a pair of women's stockings at the general store. He then

took them back to his quarters and hung them over the fireplace with a note, "Dear Santa Claus.....please try and fill these for me before next Christmas!"

Unfortunately, I was not able to find out if he got his gift.

For some of the single men who moved here, they worked in camps or on ranches where they could at least celebrate the season with their mates if not their loved

ones. Being bachelors however, they were not often well versed in the ways of the domestic arts. It was their ingenuity in this regard that made for some interesting anecdotes; especially when it came to food. Breakfast, regardless of the season, did not change much. Porridge was a staple, for most every man could make it on his own. Some, for efficiency sake, would even make a week's worth of porridge at a time! You may ask, "When this kind of volume was being made, what would they do with such a cache?" Simple



really, the whole lot would get poured into a drawer and every morning all one had to do was sit down, open the drawer and breakfast was served! Christmas dinner took on a more serious tone however, and a great deal of effort went in to making an ordinary dinner something special. Some of the seasonal favorites were hash magrundy with rowdy dowdy on the side, and punk for desert. Hash magrundy was a stew that "...might contain anything under the sun short of cigar stubs." At Christmas time, the men would go out and catch whatever they could to enhance the stew. This could be rabbit, prairie chicken or duck. Rowdy dowdy didn't sound like a dish that could be improved in any way, as it has been referred to as "...something closely resembling wallpaper paste.... Punk could be construed as a simplified Christmas cake and was made with flour, raisins, baking power and water.

Living in Chinook Country during Christmas made for some wonderful stories based solely on our unique weather. Jean Blakley wrote a wonderful story about her "Johnny Chinook" Christmas' in 1925. She says that just before Christmas, Southern Alberta had a terrible winter storm in which the temperature dropped to -40 and the snow made driving impossible. Jean and her family were in Calgary shopping, and were desperate to get home to Millarville. Luckily they were able to catch a ride on a horse drawn sleigh. While the sleigh was filled with hay, the cold was such

that the only way to stay warm was to run alongside the sleigh from time to time. Jean had heard stories about how people with exposure actually feel like they are warm just as they are about to succumb. After hours of being out in this cold, she figured this was her end and told her family about her fears. Turns out they were also feeling warm and it wasn't long before they realized that it was the Chinook blowing through that was affecting them!

It wouldn't be a collection of Christmas stories in the early days of our Province without one when we were still considered "the wild west". The story goes that a couple of cowboys came into Lethbridge from the Diamond K ranch Christmas day in 1907 to celebrate the season. Celebrating for Smoky Lee and Irish involved drinking a "festive" concoction of scotch, rye and a little something called red eye. After downing more than a few of these at Mah Wong's lunch counter, they decided to test their hand eye coordination by shooting at the tomato cans lining the shelves in the café. Understandably, Mah Wong was not impressed and opted to stop the cowboys' antics by taking his cleaver to Smoky's head. They escaped the bar and disappeared. Another of the cowboys from Diamond K came into town looking for his mates. He was told by a passerby of their antics and when he was asked how his friend Smoky was faring, he was told he was dead! It didn't take long

for the news of Smoky's demise to get through the grapevine and soon a drunk and enraged group converged on the café bent on tearing it, and anything in the immediate vicinity, apart. The Mounties and the Mayor were roused from their Christmas celebrations to the scene, with the Mounties throwing the mob into police vans, and the Mayor read them the Riot Act. Once all had been settled, several of the Diamond K cowboys returned to the ranch to make funeral arrangements. Lo and behold there was Smoky nursing his throbbing head and quite alive!

On behalf of all of us at Chinook Country Historical Society, we wish you all a wonderful holiday season and look forward to seeing you in the new year.

Research and stories courtesy of:

1. Our Future Our Past: The Alberta Heritage Digitization Project
2. Alberta Folklore and Local History Collection: University of Alberta Libraries

