

Program

{ Penultimate draft }

of the Canadian Mosaic

Celebrating Christmas in a Multicultural Society.

[Working title]

Traditions and customs related to celebrations in the dead of winter are characteristic of historical societies. Such celebrations provide an opportunity to break the monotony and lonesomeness of short days, harsh cold, and spartan living. Nowadays, this need is arguably less pressing; communication is as multifaceted as it is accessible. Yet the traditions and customs associated with Christmas, a time for family reunion and the most important of winter celebrations in Christian societies - whether observed on December 25 (Gregorian) or January 7 (Julian) calendar - remain as apparent as ever. (Non-Christian societies likewise have major winter celebrations - see below.)

Much has been written about Christmas celebrations, yet nothing had been written about the Christmas traditions and customs of ethnic immigrants who today, while retaining their particular identity, are a vibrant part of the Canadian mosaic. Many Christmas customs and traditions characteristic of immigrant groups during their initial settling into Canada have been abandoned, are dying, or have been adjusted. A few may be unchanged. Over the years ethnic communities have struggled and, more recently have been encouraged to preserve their particular identities, all the while contributing to the Canadian mosaic.

I wish to identify the more interesting of these customs and traditions and so explore "how, why, when, and where" they have been metamorphosized, as each ethnic community becomes a distinctive member of Canada's multicultural society. "Tho' much is taken, much abides."

This enquiry therefore falls into two parts. First, it explores how, prior to settling in Canada, ethnic societies typically yet distinctively celebrated Christmas. Secondly, it considers how these celebrations have changed in Canada, how these changes may have affected a community's sense of identity and whether or if such 'ethnic' customs and traditions may ultimately enrich the celebration of a "Canadian" Christmas.

Approach: The core of the text will be based on oral history. I will tape record interviews with older members of various ethnic communities - people who recall celebrating Christmas in the country of their birth and can recognize the differences that over the years and within their community have occurred since celebrating Christmas in their new homeland. The recollections might reasonably go back to the first and second decades of this century and will undoubtedly unearth particular practices related to family, communal and national traditions and customs characterising social structures long since changed beyond recognition.

To organize and, as appropriate, transcribe these recollections will be time consuming; many will provide leads for further research. Some will focus on religious, some on secular highlights of the Christmas season, others will be openly sentimental, thereby throwing fresh light on family life; a few will be obscure in origin, or unique to a certain area or community. All will be useful touchstones for an informatively researched commentary.

I will also interview later generations - to bring into focus (or identify) changing attitudes toward these 'ethnic' customs and traditions. These interviews will indicate whether later generations, increasingly exposed to [North] American Christmas customs and traditions, view certain 'old country' practices as 'sentimental archaisms like preferring candles to electric light' (to use George Orwell's image) treasured for what they represent or as a viable means of helping preserve and protect a particular heritage. Certain trends reflecting basic attitudes toward specific practices will surely emerge from these interviews.

I will consult other individuals who can help me design and conduct fruitful interviews and contribute insightful observations on the results of the interviews. These consultations may well touch on such elements as folkloric and religious traditions, sociological and linguistic factors - each potentially relevant contexts or reference points - for explanatory comments on the oral history material. I will pursue these 'contextual' aspects as a well informed layman writing for the non-specialised reader, much as I approached my recent publications on Maud Allan.

Research plans: Research will primarily depend upon the tape recorded interviews. This is apparent from preliminary bibliographical research. Except for two specific texts, the University Library holdings focus on Anglophone societies. A careful reading of Sue Samuelson's Christmas: An Annotated Bibliography, (New York, 1982) suggests a reading list of some dozen potentially relevant titles (including one French and two German texts, both of which I can read). The one text that may serve as a possible model - in format at least - is Christmas in the West (Winnipeg, 1980) a modest 'coffee table' publication, in which any reference to alcohol is nicely avoided! The bibliography will, therefore, be essentially limited to the contextual elements referred to in the preceding paragraph.

Methodology: Because they are numerically and organizationally so well established in Alberta, I will initially focus on the German and Ukrainian communities. The former, because the Catholic and Protestant churches have been so prominent in German history, will have great variety of customs and traditions, while the latter, because the Eastern Rite remains so powerful an influence, will furnish unfamiliar, colorful material, all the more treasured because it has been for so long, at least in the Ukraine itself, suppressed. I will balance this material with data from representatives of other members of the multi-cultural community, ranging, for example, from the long established Franco-Albertan and Native Indian communities [see below] to the Hungarian and the more recent (and thriving) Vietnamese communities.

Note: Re Non-Christian winter celebrations: Whether or how I can include the customs and traditions of those non-Christian societies identifying themselves with the multi-cultural community, all of whom have rich traditions related to winter celebrations, will only emerge as the project progresses. Omitting them would jeopardize the validity of the multicultural thesis, yet including them would necessarily enlarge the scope of the project. Perhaps the text can be divided into two parts - 'equal but distinct,' to use all too familiar a phrase.

Between the Christian and non-Christian societies stand the Native Indian communities of the Prairies. These communities raise particularly interesting questions. For example, how did the "Christianization" of the native people affect or integrate with the customs and traditions of a heritage that today, very correctly, is being revived? Even if a deliberate attempt was made to destroy the aboriginal heritage, do (or did) certain customs or traditions related to Winter celebrations remain, if only as vestiges, in the celebration of the Christmas season?

Readership: My target market is commercial and falls into (i) The "Common Reader" who may find the material of practical interest, inasmuch as I will include recipes and illustrations: (ii) readers - from students to educators, sociologists to historians who, committed to preserving, protecting and promoting Canada's multicultural character, may find in this text material for further research.

Dimensions of project: While the foregoing paragraphs may seem over-ambitious, my goal is to produce a collage of particular customs and traditions. Such a collage, possibly in the format of a modest coffee table volume, will represent one specific component of the Canadian multicultural mosaic. It will also indicate to what degree various communities may or may not have held on to their heritage as they celebrate the most widely observed - and commercialized - of winter events. The text will in large part consist of explanatory notes and background commentaries.

To establish a containable reference point and, at this stage for practical reasons, multi cultural communities in Alberta, where the multicultural 'spirit' happens to be particularly vibrant, will initially be my primary sources.

At this stage I would suggest that my findings either will stand as a legitimate microcosm or (less likely) as a "pilot project" for a much more ambitious investigation.

The Chair of the Department of Canadian Ethnic Studies at the University of Calgary, who has offered to help me in my investigations, tells me that this topic has never been investigated in any way.

Saint Michael's Ukrainian Center for Senior Citizens, a very large complex in Edmonton, will be one of my starting points.

I anticipate that one year's full-time work on this project would result in a completed draft suitable for submission to publishers.

The oral history material will be deposited with an appropriate archival repository.

I will be submitting this proposal to the Multi Cultural Commission of Alberta, as also the Department of the Secretary of State, for supplementary financial support.