

January 7, 2005

TWELFTH NIGHT AT THE CAMDEN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Seasonal Food, Drink and 'Molly' Dancers



Welcome to the Camden County Historical Society's President's Reception at Pomona Hall, exploring the traditions of Twelfth Night, or the Feast of the Epiphany -- a festival dating back almost 2,000 years.

Twelfth Night Around the World

Throughout the world, Twelfth Night is a time for light-hearted fun, rowdy games and dressing up in outrageous costumes -- all customs descended from the Saturnalia celebrations of ancient Rome. Part music, part history and a whole lot of fun, Twelfth Night was a time for music and dance; wassail and lambs wool; storytelling, merrymaking and imagination.

English Tradition

In England, Twelfth Night was marked by celebrations that brought to an end the twelve-day Christmas period -- a welcome break for the workers of the land which, in Tudor times, were the majority of the people. It was, traditionally, the last chance for merrymaking before their return to work.

"Wassail, Wassail All Over the Town..."

A way of passing on good wishes among family and friends, wassail has been associated with Christmas and Twelfth Night since the 1400s. Wassail is an ale-based drink seasoned with spices and honey, served from huge bowls often made of silver or pewter. The wassail bowl would be passed around with the greeting,, "Wassail," from the old English term "waes hael," meaning "be well." In time, the tradition was carried on by people going door to door, bearing good wishes and a wassail bowl of hot, spiced ale.

Lambs Wool and Toasting the Trees

In parts of England and Ireland, the traditional Twelfth Night drink is called Lambs Wool, made of cider or ale, sugar, spices and roasted apples. It was the custom to pour a little Lambs Wool on the apple trees to bless them for a bountiful harvest -- a traditional also called wassailing the apple trees. Revelers would gather in the orchards, where they sang to the trees, drank their health, poured hot cider over their roots, left cider-soaked triangles of toast called "wigs" in their branches for the birds, and scared away evil spirits with great shouts and the firing of guns.

King and Queen for a Day

England celebrated Twelfth Night with a traditional cake -- most often a dense, rich fruitcake containing both a bean and a pea. The man who bit down on the bean was the King of Twelfth Night; the woman who found the pea, his Queen. The royal pair then directed the rest of the company in merriment throughout the evening. But because custom also dictated that she whose slice of Twelfth Night cake contained the pea was expected to prepare next year's cake for the party, many a genteel lady discreetly swallowed the pea!

Three Kings Day in Spain

In Spain gifts are exchanged on the Day of the Three Kings, since this was the day -- 12 days after the birth of Jesus -- when the three kings arrived bearing gifts for the Christ child. For this special occasion, a crown-shaped loaf of bread is prepared, flavored with orange and lemon zest, brandy and orange flower water, and decorated with candied fruit and flaked almonds. A silver coin, small figure or dried bean is hidden inside.

Mexican Twelfth Night

Throughout every city and small town in Mexico, bakeries still offer the traditional Rosca de Reyes, an oval sweetbread decorated with candied fruit. Roscas come in every size -- from small ones serving two to three people, to ones that delight more than 20 people. Regardless of size, hidden inside each rosca is a plastic figure of the baby Jesus, hidden to symbolize the need for a safe, secure place where He could be born -- a place where King Herod could not find Him. Each person cuts a slice of the rosca, the knife symbolizing the danger the baby was in. Then, one by one, each guest carefully examines their slice, hoping they *didn't* get the figure. For whoever gets the figure hosts, and must invite everyone present, a celebration on February 2nd -- Candelaria, or Candle Mass Day, when nativity scenes are put away for another year and the Mexican Christmas season comes to an end.

In Germany

Until the Roman church adopted December 25th as the Christmas holiday in the Fourth Century, January 6th was the day of celebration -- *Heilige Drei Konige*, meaning the Wise Men or Three Kings -- in Germany. To this day, the initials of the Three Kings -- C+M+B (Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar) -- plus the year are inscribed in chalk over doorways throughout German-speaking countries on the eve of January 6th to protect house and home. In many parts of Europe, including Austria, Germany and Switzerland, Christmas celebrations do not end until this date.

Twelfth Night and La Befana

In Italy the good luck bean is hidden in focaccia rather than cake: three white beans for the Magi and one black one. Whoever finds the black bean is named King and chooses his Queen. This final day of the Christmas season is also the start of Carnival, associated with jokes and tricks. In Tuscany a man would dress up like a witch and surround himself with *befanotti* -- low-life characters in false beards and inside out jackets. Booths in piazzas offer toys and games; vendors dress young boys as women with blackened faces, caps on their heads, a long reed in one hand, a lantern in the other, and hang them with baskets of oranges and golden pine cones. In some Italian communities, engagements are traditionally announced on Epiphany, with the remaining bachelors and spinsters paired off by lot. If a girl is left without a partner she is given the title of Befana for the year.

La Befana is one of Italy's most celebrated legends. Each year on January 6th Italian children wake up in hopes La Befana has visited them. As the story goes, the three Wise Men seeking the Christ child stopped at a small house for directions. When an old woman holding a broom opened her door a crack to find three colorfully dressed strangers asking directions, she could not point them in the right direction. But before they left they kindly asked the old woman to join them on their journey. She declined, claiming she had to do her housework. But after they left she thought perhaps she had made a mistake, so she tried to catch up with the kind men. Despite hours of searching, she failed to find them. But thinking of the opportunity she had missed, the old woman stopped every child she saw on the streets to give them a small treat in hopes that child was the Christ child.

In France

Since the Middle Ages, the French have celebrated Epiphany with a Galette des Rois -- literally, the Kings Cake. Made of puff pastry, it can be plain or filled with almond-flavored paste. But whether plain or filled, the galette hides a lucky charm. The thin, round cake is cut into pieces in

the pantry and carried into the room covered with a white napkin. The youngest person in the room traditionally shouts out which guest gets each slice of cake. Whoever finds the charm in their slice of galette becomes King or Queen and is given a gold paper crown. The King or Queen then chooses his Queen or her King by dropping the charm in that person's glass. But even this custom could backfire since the King or Queen had to buy a round of drinks for all present, resulting in stingy behavior when the "lucky" King or Queen swallowed the charm. It is also customary that every action of the royal pair is watched and imitated with mock ceremony by the entire party, who shout, "The Queen drinks," "The King laughs," or "The Queen drops her napkin."

Mardi Gras

Closer to home, the well-known New Orleans tradition of Mardi Gras, which was begun in the 1870s and borrows heavily from European customs, begins on Twelfth Night and continues until Fat Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. One of the most beloved traditions of Mardi Gras is the King Cake, baked in honor of the three kings. The oval shape symbolizes the unity of faiths; the cake is decorated in traditional Mardi Gras colors: purple for justice, green for faith and gold for power. A small baby, symbolizing the baby Jesus, is baked into each cake. As in so many other cultures, the "search for the baby" adds to the fun as each person waits to see in whose slice of cake the baby will be discovered. For while custom holds that whoever finds the baby will be rewarded with good luck, that person is also responsible for bringing the King Cake to the next party or gathering.

The Yule Log

The Yule log, traditionally lit on Christmas day, was kept burning until Twelfth Night to bring good fortune to the house for the coming year. Its charred remains were then kept -- both to kindle the next year's Yule log and to protect the house from fire and lightning. In Greece, legend has it that demons who were normally forced underground during the rest of the year, could roam freely on the earth's surface during the 12 days of Christmas. Known more for malicious practical jokes than for any real harm -- braiding horses' tails, souring pans of milk, and putting out the home fire in a particularly indelicate way -- it was Greek custom to scare the demons away by keeping the Yule log burning through Twelfth Night when the demons went back underground.

Molly Dance

"Molly" dancing was an annual rite in the freezing, blustery peat bogs of England when men in East Anglia would go from house to house making fun of local festival dances. Half of them would dress as men and half as women, or "Mollies," dancing for money or beer. If they didn't get either they were likely to stir up some mischief.

Plow boys also traditionally performed this 19th-century East Anglian dance when they couldn't work during the frosts. On "Plough Monday" (the first Monday after Twelfth Night) they would drag their plows through the villages and dance, shouting, "A penny for the plough boys!", collecting money for food and beer. Some blackened their faces with cork or charcoal, or painted their faces so as not to be recognized afterwards ... especially if they had just plowed up the garden of some skinflint who refused to put change in their tin!

From Mollies to Mummings

Twelfth Night was also a traditional day for plays, or "mummings," and it is thought that Shakespeare's play of the same name may have taken its title from the fact it was first performed as part of Twelfth Night celebrations about 1601. And lest you think Mollies are a thing of the past in some distant part of England, consider that time-honored event many of us have grown up with -- the annual Philadelphia Mummers Parade. You need look no further than the "wenches" of the comic divisions strutting their stuff down Broad Street to see how the age-old tradition of Molly dance continues to this day, right in our own backyard.