

English Christmas features food

By Suzanne Teten
Daily Nebraskan Staff Reporter

Father Christmas stuffs the stockings. Geese roast in ovens and children carol through the neighborhoods. Each is an important ingredient of a traditional English Christmas.

But there's more, says Robin Bowers, UNL associate professor of English.

Bowers has lived in the United States for 25 years, but he and his Nebraska-born wife and children still practice some English customs during the holiday season. They usually include Christmas cake or plum pudding on their Christmas menu, he said.

Bowers said Christmas cake is a dark, rich fruitcake with a layer of marzipan covered by hard icing. Plum pudding is a baked fruit pudding served with custard sauce, sometimes made with rum.

When Bowers was a little boy, he said, coins often were baked in the pudding as a surprise for young children. That custom isn't as common now.

Although English people don't eat much turkey, Bowers said, a traditional Christmas dinner always includes fowl, either goose, chicken or other poultry. The English, like Americans, eat fruits and nuts. Bowers said he had never eaten cranberry sauce before coming to America, but he likes it.

Christmas tree decorations are similar to American ones, he said. However, more homemade decorations like cookies hang from the branches. Often real candles glow on English Christmas trees.

Bowers said English people leave their Christmas trees up until Jan. 6 to celebrate Epiphany.

English churches also have Christmas trees. When Bowers and his family went to England for Christmas last year, he said they saw an "amusing" sight. A church they visited put its Christmas tree in the baptismal font.

Kissing under the mistletoe is pagan tradition that also crossed the sea from England. Bowers

said the English believe the ancient custom brings luck.

Gift-giving isn't as "lavish" in England as in America, Bowers said. On the other hand, Christmas stockings aren't as popular in America. They are "real treats" for English children, he said.

Since snow seldom falls in England, Christmas snow is another "treat," he said.

Although they usually can't go sleigh-riding or sledding, English people indulge in entertainment steeped in 19th century tradition.

"Uniquely English" pantomimes are performed every Christmas at theaters throughout England, Bowers said. The pantomimes parody a fairy tale like "Mother Goose" or "Peter Pan," he said, but they are modernized and very funny.

Bowers said the male and female lead roles are reversed "for laughs." The pantomimes are "jazzed up" with music, dancing and slapstick comedy. Although the programs are presented primarily for the children, he said, the performances are family affairs.

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Irish holiday . . .

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Sprigs and boughs of holly adorn most homes, Sayre said. The Irish make aromatic wreaths of holly, laurel and bay. Holly crosses often hang in the window with the Christmas candle, she said.

Irish Catholics say Midnight

Mass in large city churches, Sayer said. But country folks have no midnight services, she said.

Holiday tables are laden with Christmas goose or ham and turkey, currant loaves and plum pudding, Sayer said. The whole family makes the giant pudding, she said, and they start about a month ahead. The batter of fruit and nuts is stuffed in a pillowcase or heavy gauze and hung up to season. The pudding is then boiled for a day in a large pot and served steaming with brandy and cream,

Sayer said.

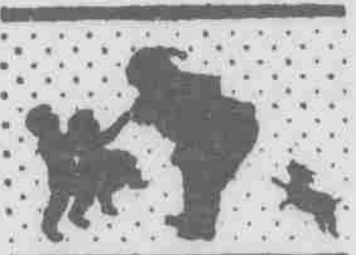
Christmas is called "Game Day" is Ireland, Sayer said. Relatives spend the day at play before and after the feast, she said.

The fun continues to St. Stephen's Day, when men in costumes roam the streets with instruments and sing the holiday song. Mothers often take their broods to pantomime fairy tale plays. The shows usually run for a week, Sayer said, but St. Stephen's day is the most popular time to go.

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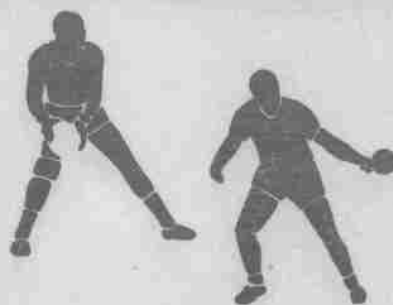


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