

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

La Fête de la Chandeleur

It's January in New Orleans. The New Orleans Carnival season, with roots in preparing for the Christian season of Lent, has already commenced, beginning on January 6 (Twelfth Night, the Epiphany or "Little Christmas" as some call it). The Crescent City's season of king cake parties, balls and parades is now in full swing. Custom holds that the king cake is designed "to draw the kings (or magi)" to the Epiphany. *La fève*, currently a plastic baby in New Orleans cakes, is concealed within the cake and the person who finds the trinket in their slice becomes king for the day and will have to spring for the next cake. At first, *la fève* was literally a broad bean (*fève*), but it was eventually replaced by a variety of figurines fashioned out of porcelain and — more recently — plastic. Some young revelers in days gone by, not wishing to incur the expense of throwing the next *fête*, simply swallowed the bean.

Also on January 6, the Twelfth Night Revelers, one of Carnival's oldest Krewes, hold a beautiful *bal masque* each year to mark the occasion. And the Phunny Phorty Phellows take their annual streetcar ride to celebrate this official start of Mardi Gras. What's more, (while enjoying a slice of king cake) New Orleanians take down their Christmas decorations on Twelfth Night (a tradition that has been around for some time).

But what's that you say? The Christmas lights are still strung beneath the gutters, the tree's still full of ornaments and some bows and holly are still all over the house. Oh, you have an excuse. There've been too many thrilling things to do in New Orleans, such as the Sugar Bowl, the Saints' victories and the BCS Championship Game. You just haven't had time to take down the decorations.

Well, it appears that those of you who still have your holiday decorations up may have been granted a reprieve (if you wish to take it). The custom in some English-speaking countries that maintains that it is unlucky to leave Christmas decorations up after Twelfth Night

(according to Radford, ed. Cole (1961), *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions*. London: Hutchinson) is actually a more modern tradition. This belief was originally attached to the festival of Candlemas (Candle Mass), celebrated on February 2: "The older tradition was that they must come down by Candlemas, the day on which the wider ecclesiastical Christmas season ends."

You may remember the English poet Robert Herrick (1591–1674). He's the one who advised "the Virgins" to *carpe diem* and "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may". In his poem entitled *Ceremony upon Candlemas Eve*, he writes:

"Down with the rosemary, and so
Down with the bays and mistletoe;
Down with the holly, ivy, all,
Wherewith ye dress'd the Christmas Hall"

As the poem suggests, the eve of Candlemas was the day on which Christmas garlands were removed from people's homes; for any vestiges of berries, holly or greenery was believed to bring death among the congregation before another year was out.

We know now that it's celebrated on February 2, but just what is Candlemas? And is there a precedent in Louisiana or New Orleans for celebrating this feast?

The answer to the second question goes back to my youth and then back over three hundred years ago. When I was young, my father took me on regular fishing trips out into the Gulf of Mexico. He pointed out the *Chandeleur* Islands (in French: *Les Îles de Chandeleur*) as a chain of uninhabited barrier islands "hanging out there like a string of lights". He told me that when the French came upon the island chain, it reminded them of "a huge chandelier". Every time a hurricane struck this part of the Breton National Wildlife Refuge, a vital migration point for many birds on their way south, I visualized a beautiful "chandelier" being destroyed by the fury of the powerful winds. Trouble was, the story just wasn't true.

The islands were actually named when French explorer, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville was sailing in search of the mouth of the Mississippi River along the Gulf Coast. Iberville, Bienville's brother, named the islands on the eve of *La Fête de la Chandeleur*, the Feast of Candlemas, on February 1, 1700.

Candlemas celebrates the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, which falls on February 2, and is also known as the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. The event is described in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:22-40), where Mary and Joseph took the infant Jesus to the Temple in

Jerusalem forty days after his birth to complete Mary's ritual purification after childbirth, and to perform the redemption of the firstborn, in obedience to Mosaic Law. According to the Law a mother who had given birth to a male child was considered unclean for seven days; moreover she was to remain three and thirty days "in the blood of her purification". When the forty days were over, the mother was to bring to the temple a lamb for sacrifice. But if the parents were too poor to be able to offer a lamb (Mary and Joseph, according to Luke), they were to bring two turtle doves or two young pigeons. Then "the priest prayed for her and so she was cleansed" (Leviticus 12: 2-8). So it was that two turtle doves (just like the "On the Second Day of Christmas") were sacrificed for Jesus at the original Presentation, celebrated today forty days after Christmas.

According to the Gospel, a Jewish man named Simeon the Righteous held the baby Jesus in his arms and said that he would be a light for the Gentiles (Luke 2: 32). Since Christians consider Jesus to be the "light of the world", it is fitting that candles are blessed on this day and that a candle-lit procession precedes the Mass. But this is not the only reason candles are carried during the Feast of Candlemas. Originally a Pagan festival honoring the Roman god named Pan, revelers paraded with torches through the streets. In 472, the Pope decided to Christianize the holiday and celebrate when Jesus was presented at the Temple. This "meeting" at the Temple is why the festival is also called *Hypapante* in Greek (meaning "The Meeting").

Pagans also dedicated the month of February to the infernal gods, and since Pluto stole Proserpine, and her mother Ceres sought her in the night with lighted candles, so they, too, at the beginning of the month, walked about the city with lighted candles. Because the Church could not eliminate the custom, they ordained that Christians should carry candles in honor of the Blessed Virgin; and so what was done before in the honor of Ceres was later done in honor of the Blessed Virgin. Pagan customs became Christian ones.

In the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple is the fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. The Feast of the Presentation, or Candlemas, is among the most ancient feasts of the Christian Church. There were sermons on the Feast delivered by numerous bishops in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

The French holiday, *La Fête de la Chandeleur*, also known as *Crêpes Day*, is celebrated on February 2, as well. It is celebrated with delicious *crêpes*, which must be eaten only after eight p.m. It is traditional to hold a coin in your writing hand and a *crêpe* pan in the other, and flip the *crêpe* into the air. If you successfully catch the *crêpe* in the pan, your family will be prosperous for the rest of the year.

The French consume a lot of *crêpes* on *Chandeleur*, and with good reason. Some believe that the *crêpes* are a symbol of the sun representing a sign of the returning warmth. During winter's midterm solstice and our eager anticipation for the return of warm weather, we share a common bond with France. Here in the United States on February 2, we celebrate Ground Hog Day and wait for that often reluctant rodent (Pennsylvania's Punxsutawney Phil is the most famous) to come up and foretell a longer winter or an earlier spring. In New Orleans, February 11, 2011, an orange-toothed nutria named T-Boy emerged from a burrow in the muck of the swamp exhibit at the Audubon Zoo. Zoo staffers reported that T-boy did not see his shadow, but he did predict "a great Mardi Gras".

Candlemas is also known as *Candelaria* in Spanish speaking countries. Whoever finds the baby hidden inside the *Rosca de Reyes* (Kings Cake) on Epiphany (January 6) is obligated to bring food to a gathering held on February 2. February 2 is also the day of the *Virgen de Candelaria*, *Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria* (Patron Saint of the Canary Islands). The *Isleños*, or Canary Islanders, of Louisiana are aware of these ancient traditions. *Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria*, popularly called *La Morenita*, (the dark-haired one, or Black Madonna) refers to a statue of the Virgin Mary on the island of Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands. The center of her worship is located in the city of Candelaria in Tenerife. *La Morenita* acquired a reputation for curing illnesses and attracted pilgrims from all over. When the Spanish arrived, they built a church for her in 1526. In 1826 she returned to her origins when a tidal wave swept her from the church in *Candelaria* back out to sea.

In the Church of England Candlemas may be celebrated on February 2, or on the Sunday between January 28 and February 3. Many Orthodox Christians celebrate this event by bringing beeswax candles to their local church to be blessed. But since the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council within the Roman Catholic Church, Candlemas is now referred to as the Feast of Presentation of the Lord. The candles symbolic of the Blessed Virgin have been downplayed in favor of Simeon's prophecy of Jesus as being "a light for the Gentiles". Pope John Paul II connected the feast day with the renewal of religious vows.

Modern pagans celebrate on February 2, at the astronomical midpoint, or on the full moon closest to the first spring thaw. They believe that Candlemas is a Christianization of the Gaelic festival of *Imbolc*, which was celebrated in pre-Christian Europe (especially the Celtic areas) at about the same time of year. *Imbolc* is called "St. Brigid's Day" or "Brigid" in Ireland. Both Brigids are associated with holy wells and springs, sacred flames, healing and metalcraft. The pagan goddess Brigid, daughter of the Dagda, was the wife of Bres of the Fomorians, with whom she had a son, Ruadán. St. Brigid was the Abbess of

Kildare and believed by Celtic Christians to be the midwife of Christ and "Mary of the Gael". In Ireland and Scotland she is considered the "foster mother of Jesus".

There are all kinds of wonderful French axioms for *La Fête de la Chandeleur*. Here are just a couple:

À la Chandeleur, l'hiver cesse ou reprend vigueur.
On Candlemas, winter ends or strengthens.

Rosée à la Chandeleur, hiver à sa dernière heure.
Dew on Candlemas, winter at its final hour.

Or you may prefer (in English) this New Orleans proverb:

Twelfth Night is over, your tree is still there
And holiday lighting is hung everywhere.
With visions of king cake adrift in your head —
Relax! Wait till Candlemas. Have *crêpes* instead.

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