

Winter Traditions and Celebrations: Past and Present

There are many traditions and celebrations that occur during our long winter months here in Alaska. This information provides a great opportunity to introduce Alaska Native cultures into your classroom in one way or another.

Remembering Russian Orthodox Christmas By Geneva Penetac

On Christmas Eve (January 6) we'd hitch up our dog teams to begin slavick (starring). It was so much fun mushing across the frozen lake to the houses nestled along its sparkling shore. We'd jump off one sled and jump onto another! The sky was clear, the moon shone big and BRIGHT and the stars twinkled so low that I felt I could touch them! It was beautiful! The snowflakes caught the moon's rays and bounced off light beams from their six edges making the night sparkle like diamonds.

As we entered each house one by one, the star-holder would stand under the icon area while we faced him singing in Yupik. After singing the host and hostess would invite us to eat the foods we set out. The men would eat first, then the women and children. It was understood that the host and hostess with their children would join the slavickers onto the next house, if they wanted to. At the first house I received a present of maple syrup! Was I happy!! By the last house there would be lots of dog teams! We'd be so full and tired and ready for bed. What a wonderful, wonderful, night.

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Russian Christmas By Lucy Brown

We couldn't wait for the church bells to ring at 12 midnight signaling that Christmas had started! We'd run to the church and enter quietly! During the three hour church service, we'd kneel and stand, trying to be good and stay awake. The men and boys stood on one side and the women and girls stood on the other side. Finally near the end of the service we'd have to kiss Jesus' picture. I was never sure if I should really kiss the picture or just play kiss it - for fear of getting the picture dirty. So I play kissed the picture!

After church we'd go to the first house and sing in Yupik and Russian while the star holder twirled the star. After caroling, we'd eat and go to the next house.

Now there was my friend's house which I feared greatly to enter! I made my friend promise not to leave me behind in it - that she was to wake me up if I fell asleep. (There was someone who had died in the house and I was scared that a ghost would get me!) I fell asleep and my friend left me behind!! (Some friend.) I got up when someone entered and lit the kerosene lamp. I felt scared and my heart was pounding to think that I had slept in the house all alone. But I finally calmed myself down.

Slavick was going to church, eating, singing, sharing, and visiting friends and family.

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Russian Orthodox Christmas (Starring - Caroling) January 7th **By Mable Brandon**

Starring, an ancient Russian Orthodox Christian custom, originated in the Ukraine. Starting on January 7, (Russian Christmas) a group of people would start off following a person carrying a pole made of wood, with a star on top - an icon in the center of the star - with a candle in the front. When they came to a house they would stop and stand facing the star. The star holder twirled the star while the rest of the group sang the theme song or trotarion.

The religious significance behind the ritual represents the three wise men following the star. The twirling of the star reminded them of eternity.

When the Russian priests came to Alaska they brought the custom to the Native people they converted. The Natives of the Bristol Bay area modified it to suit their needs.

By January 7, excitement builds; a group from the village starts off carrying a big star. They go from house to house, village to village. The people invite them into their homes. The group faces the person twirling the star and starts singing carols. After the caroling the starring group is asked to sit down to a special meal or partake from food laid out, smorgasbord style; presents might be passed out. When the group is ready to leave, they invite the people from the house to join them and the ritual is repeated until late into the night.

The Native star is made out of available material such as wood, wire, garland, Christmas tree ornaments, etc. It is approximately three feet in diameter. In the center is a religious icon. Directly in back of the icon is a small pole with which to hold the star.