

## 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.

### Russian Christmas in Nondalton, AK By Marilyn Balluta

Russian Christmas is January 7-14: one whole week. This is a busy and exciting time in Nondalton. Nondalton is 190 miles southwest of Anchorage in the Lake Clark/Lake Iliamna area. Everyone is getting ready for slavy (slavivk). We start out by going to church in the morning and again in the afternoon at 1:00 p.m. They first sing Russian Christmas songs in church and then go to the graveyard and usually sing by someone's grave who had recently passed away. The candle holders go first, then the icon, star holders (as many as four or five), the singers, then rest of the crowd. There is a leader who directs the group and decides which house will be next.

The first house is the preacher's house and second house is the church keeper's house and the third house is another church keepers house. The third house they will decide if the group should split up into two groups. This always happens because there are too many houses and it would take all night into the next morning before they are done.

Before the slavy group enters the house they sing "Glory to God in the Highest, Piece on Earth" outside. This notifies the people that Jesus was born. This also gives the family time to stand in one place and someone lights the candle by the icon. A long time ago they would shoot three times before the slavy group came to the house. This signal was telling everybody that the family was rejoicing, everybody is happy. (It's like when everybody brings in the New Year with fire crackers). Today they have phones to call each other but some people still do the traditional shooting.

Once inside the house they sing a total of 4 major songs (Russian and English); the other songs are Christmas carols. The very last song is "Many Years, Many Happy New Years". They wish the family many more years to come and everyone says "Merry Christmas". The family goes and kissed the icon and leaves money by the icon for the church. Everyone does the same thing and shakes hands or kisses the family members and says Merry Christmas. When they're done the family starts to serve everyone food. The elders will be served first. Last year we started cooking big pots of soup early in the morning until late that evening. Sometimes you will be eating at three houses, one right after the another. At each house you go to all the food is given out and you cannot refuse to eat when you're served. The same with when they are giving out candy, gum, dry fish, cookies, etc. That's why people take bag with them, to save some of the food.

The two groups will decide which house will be last and meet at that one house. They let the family of the house know ahead of time so this means sitting up all night until 2-3:00 in the morning. When they are done everyone goes home to get a few hours of sleep and it's time to get ready, because other villages will be coming the next day to sing. Also they decide who will be the singers, which stars, and candle holder, will go to the next village.

Last Russian Christmas there were five villages (Newhalen, New Stuyahok, N. Naknek, S. Naknek, Kokaknok) that came to Nondalton. When there are two or more different groups in one village they try not to meet at one house or meet in the road. If they do meet, no matter where, one village has to sing all their songs and then the other village sings all their songs. This is like holding a full church service.

This happened to Nondalton group of Iliamna. We met another village as we were leaving a house and they were coming to the same house and met right in the middle of the tundra. It was cold and we had to stand there until they got done singing. The only good part about that is there were some Northern Lights dancing in the sky. We all hopped back onto the trucks, Hondas, and snow machines, to go to the next house. Lots of fun visiting and traveling!