

Celebrating Christmas holidays



By Mary Cook

When I asked my Indonesian daughter-in-law Poppy about her Christmas birthday, and learned that it wasn't a time of celebration in her culture, I wondered about other people, mainly Canadians from our area who have Christmas day birthdays. I was curious to know their stories. Was the fact that their birthday fell on December 25th a bonus, just another day, or was it celebrated as it would be had it fallen in any other month of the year?

The people who shared their birthday stories came from all parts of the Ottawa and Seaway Valley, and the city of Ottawa. Most had good memories, some sad, and one or two said they wished their birthday had been any other day than on December 25th. Here, then, are the birthday stories of a few of the people whose commonality is that they all share the same birth date, with the exception of one, who was born very late on Christmas Eve, but calls herself a Christmas baby.

Evelyn Cleary of Ingleside was born in Scotland to a war bride mother. She came to Canada as a toddler on the *Mauritania*, and her mother told her that when she came into the world very late on Christmas Eve, the nuns were singing carols. She was called Eve, because of her time of birth, and her birthday was always celebrated on Christmas Eve. And with New Years being more important in Scotland than Christmas (the celebration of Hogmanay), Christmas was more of a religious celebration. However, her mother always made sure she had at least one birthday present. Christmas and her birthday were always kept as separate celebrations, a tradition she has carried on with her own children.

Lise Madore of Gatineau was born in Hull on Christmas day, but she never felt shortchanged or felt left out of birthday celebrations. "There was always a birthday cake, and a separate present. But I remember going to bed and there would be nothing under the tree. Then we were wakened at midnight and everything was unwrapped under the tree. And my birthday and Christmas were always mixed together. Actually, my birthday cake was my real present. I have very happy Christmas memories, and my birthday was not that special because of it falling on

Christmas Day, it was all mixed in together, but I do remember that birthday cake. It made me feel special.”

Richard Fitzgibbon of Almonte was born on Christmas day in 1940 in Toronto, and his mother always tried to separate his birthday and make it special. And it was celebrated on the actual day, and always after the main Christmas dinner was over. “That’s when my birthday was recognized. And I got just as many presents as everyone else, including birthday presents. I can remember one birthday especially. I don’t know how old I was, but boy was I excited. I got my first Lionel Electric train. I was so thrilled. And of course then there were the Christmas presents as well. But the train was for my birthday. I remember too that Mother always made funny cupcakes for me to take to school because I had a Christmas birthday.”

Patricia Noel of Kanata has mixed feelings and memories of her Christmas birthday. Her mother died when she was just a baby, so there were no family traditions established for either her birthday or Christmas. When she was eight years old, the family she went to live with gave her a surprise birthday party, which she remembers as her first recognition of her birthday on Christmas day. She didn’t live with her father, but sometimes if she visited him on her birthday, she would have a birthday cake. Sometimes she would get two presents...one for her birthday and one for Christmas. She thinks it’ was fate that she married someone by the name of Noel. She remembers spending her 13th birthday in the Civic Hospital. “I thought it was going to be a sad birthday, but the staff at the Civic made me a birthday cake and came in my room and sang to me. That made me feel very special. But I didn’t really have a birthday celebration until after I was married.”

However, things changed for the better when Patricia’s father remarried. “It was only then that I really began to enjoy my Christmas birthday. It became very special.”

Betty Guy of Winchester lost her mother at four years of age, and she was taken to live with a family in McAlpine near Vankleek Hill. It was the beginning of a wonderful life, where she was treated like a daughter. Her Christmas birthday was always recognized as a very special day, and one Christmas birthday she remembers with great fondness. The year I remember so well was the year when I got a special birthday present that I can remember to this day. I got a little pair of white snow boots trimmed with white fur. I thought they were the most beautiful boots I had ever seen. I had two stockings out for gifts too. One was a regular Christmas stocking for my Christmas gifts, and the other was one of those long brown stockings we girls used to wear, and it was filled with my birthday presents. I could never understand because my birthday was on Christmas, why I wasn’t in

the manger at Mass.”

Betty Bird of Ottawa never felt cheated because her birthday fell on Christmas day. She was lucky, because she got presents for both. She admits though, that her birthday present was more like a small remembrance...it wasn't a big present, like she might have gotten had her birthday fallen on any day but Christmas. Having a birthday on the same day as Christmas made it sometimes feel like it was an afterthought. “But I never thought too much about it when I was younger.” Her late husband and her daughter also had Christmas season birthdays, so the ritual of celebrating all three at the same time began. “Since my husband’s day was on December 23rd, that’s when we celebrated all three with a birthday cake.” She is always amused at people’s reactions when she says her birthday is on Christmas day. “I guess there aren’t that many,” she says. We can attest to that. We did a wide search to come up with the few we were able to track down.

Mary Pierce of Arnprior was born on Christmas Day, and she says she was one of the lucky ones because as well as Christmas presents, she always could count on birthday gifts as well. One long established custom sets Mary’s birthday apart from other celebrations in the holiday season. “We always have two Christmas trees. One is upstairs and it is the birthday Christmas tree, because of the December birthdays, and I think of it as being very special. And the real Christmas tree is always downstairs. It’s our way of separating the two events.”

As Christmas day fast approaches, we are sure there are many others in this area who are celebrating birthdays as well. Forever Young wishes them, and those who shared their stories with us, and all of our faithful readers, the merriest of Christmases.

This article originally appeared in the December 2009 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.