

History of Our Old Time English Carols

by Hubert James Newhook

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In the year 1777, our progenitor, Charles Newhook, at the age of 25, moved with his wife Elizabeth, from their birthplace and residence in Tarrant, Gunville, Dorcet, England, to Trinity, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland.

Between that date and 1799, eight children (6 boys and 2 girls) were born to the couple: Charles 1778, George 1780, William 1782, Mary 1786, James 1788, John 1792, Sarah 1796 and Samuel 1799.

Charles senior was a master shipbuilder and, as such, procured employment with the firm of J. J. Lester Ltd. in Trinity, Trinity Bay.

As the sons advanced in age, they learned and followed their father's trade and, to gain access to a fresher and a more abundant supply of timber to harvest for their shipbuilding, they gradually migrated south in Trinity Bay and took up residence in the tiny settlements of New Harbour and Dildo.

Some years later, in the early 1800's, one of the brothers, James (my great, great, great, grandfather) moved his family to the west side of Trinity Bay, built a house and settled down in a little place called Norman's Cove. The main reason for the move was that there grew there an abundance of large trees suitable for the strong timbers required for his boatbuilding trade (according to stories handed down by my father, Hubert (great, great grandson of James)).

The old time carols, without a doubt, were brought by Charles and Elizabeth from Dorset England, where they had followed the practice of singing them every year, and this practice continued in Trinity, Newfoundland, and was carried on by the brothers down through the succeeding years.

Having listened to and joined in the singing of those carols in his earlier years, my father and his siblings continued the practice all through my childhood and adolescence years. My brother, Ernest, joined the group when he became of age.

I carried with me fond memories of a group of men singing these carols each Christmas Eve, without any musical accompaniment. The lead singer was usually our school teacher, my uncle Cleophas (Cle), whom the others (all men) followed in their strong and powerful voices.

The group of six or eight men commenced their visitations early in the evening, shortly after the supper meal, and visited some eight or nine households, usually those homes where there was a sick or elderly person. My aged grandmother often commented that she could not fall asleep on Christmas Eve until she had heard the singing of these carols - the best part of her Christmas.

One of my fondest recollections of that evening was being awakened, as a small boy, by the sound of the men's winter boots stomping and shuffling on a cold frosty night, in over the boarded platform leading to the porch-door entrance, and the continued entrance noises from the unheated back porch. When all had entered and stood around in the kitchen, the singing commenced until all five of the carols were completed. No beverage of any kind was offered the group and no alcoholic beverages were seen to be in their possession. They did not stay long after the singing and, with a few handshakes and Christmas greetings, the group moved on to the next household.

The total number of homes visited was about eight or nine depending on the number of sick or shut-in. The last house to be visited at the end of the tour had no invalid or sick person. This was the house of the sawmiller, who played a fiddle and usually had a supply of alcoholic beverage on hand. Singing and dancing here were, no doubt, quite unlike the Christmas Carol singing earlier.

This custom of old-time carol singing to the shut-ins continued annually until the outbreak of World War II, at which time customs changed dramatically. By this time, most of the carollers were either deceased or getting on in years and not strong of voice. Furthermore a number of men went off to war, or went to work constructing the army and navy bases in various locations throughout the island and, with the arrival of radio entertainment, plus the influx of visiting soldiers and their interesting vehicles from the bases (and planes flying overhead - the first ever seen in these parts) interest in the these carols dwindled and ceased.

Some twenty years later, I came up with the idea of having my brother Ernest (the only surviving member of the singing group) to sing for me the carols, while I recorded his singing on my small tape recorder. I then had them typed and, with my wife Dorothy and our three youngest children (Christopher, Angela and David) we resumed the singing of these old carols every Christmas Eve since.

It is my hope and trust that this wonderful old tradition will continue in our family well into future years.