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## Greek and Montenegrin Celebrations

2300 words

## ( Easter and Christmas )

There was no sudden or mass invasion or migration of Greeks and Montenegrins, who are a branch of the Serbian Slavs, into the coal fields of Northern New Mexico, but one family at a time came and settled, prospered, and sent back for friends or relatives. Now you will find a colony of Greeks and a banded-group of Montenegrins living in Van Houten, New Mexico, a coal camp of the St. Louis, Rocky Mt. and Pacific Co. located about sixteen miles south of Raton, New Mexico. The camp, at that time called Willow, was started in the early 1900's. Soon after they began to come and take up their new life in New Mexico, but they continued to hold to many of the customs of their home land.

The Greeks can be classified into two groups. The one group is composed of the Greeks who came from the mainland of Greece, and the other group consists of Greeks from the Island of Crete, in the Mediterranean Sea. The two groups stay to themselves and do not mingle with each other. However, at Easter time they join to take part in the festivities of that season.

The Montenegrins do not celebrate as extensively as the Greeks at the Easter time, but hold their celebration at the Christmas season.

Both the Greeks and Montenegrins reckon their time by the old calendar, which makes both Easter and Christmas fall on days, ten days in advance of the days recognized by the modern Christian world. Therefore, their Christmas is the 15th of December, and their Easter ten days before the recognized Easter Day whenever it happens to occur.

~~Preparations for Easter.~~

Preparations for the celebration of Easter by the Greeks in Van Houten begin about a week before their Easter Day, which falls ten days before the regular American Easter Sunday.

~~Food.~~

The preparations include the baking of bread. Loaves and loaves of bread are baked. Some are large and some are small. They are baked in regular shapes and in fancy shapes; they are made in rings and some are twisted. The bread is made with eggs and sugar to a light-bread basis. Hard boiled eggs, the shells of which have been colored various colors, are placed in the dough so that when the bread is baked the eggs will protrude through the top of the loaf. Poppy seeds and anise seeds adorn the tops of the loaves; they stick to the loaves because of the sweet cream which has been brushed on partly to hold them there, but mainly to cause the loaf to be glazed when bakēd. As the loaves are baked they are hung on the walls until they are wanted for food.

A large supply of Greek Candy is also made to have during the celebration. It is made on a gelatin base, and is a soft candy and is colored with vegetable dyes. They also have a candy which is imported from Greece. It is made from soy beans. It is very good, and liked by Americans too.

These Greeks also make a pastry which they always have on Easter Sunday. Instead of being cooked in deep fat, it is boiled in deep honey, and when done powdered sugar is sprinkled on top. Needless to say that a few bites are sufficient, as it is extremely rich.



~~Friday before Easter.~~

On Friday before Easter these Greek people, young and old, take part in the burning of 'Old Man Gloom', or as some of them call it 'Judas.' A wire is stretched between two posts or buildings and a figure made of straw and rags, dressed in an old suit, is hung on the wire in such a way that it will slide back and forth. This effigy is lighted, and as it burns the children take sticks and poles, they poke, beat, and jab it, pushing it back and forth along the line. This creates a lively feeling among the children as they participate, and the grown-ups as they watch. This feeling is supposed to last throughout the entire Easter season.

~~The Dance.~~

On Friday Evening before Easter, there is a big dance. Everyone goes, even the young and the oldest. All dress in very elaborate and colorful costumes. The dance that they do is very much like an old fashioned schottische with the exception that it is very slow, and the dancers go only forward. Starting with the leader they form a line each joined to the next by a twisted handkerchief. This line is never broken, even as they weave back and forth, twist and turn, and go in and out. No particular music is used for this dance, but the watchers help keep an even tempo by clapping their hands rhythmatically.

~~Dress of the Girls.~~

The girls braid their hair in two braids down their backs, and as they braid they fasten a ribbon in with the hair. The ribbon continues unbroken from one braid to the other forming a loop at the ends of the braids.

They wear ankle length skirts of a dark color, generally

blue, brown, or black. Their lace-trimmed waists are generally white, light blue, or pink. They wear aprons which tie at the waist and reach almost to the bottoms of their skirts. These are either made of a woven material or are embroidered with Greek embroidery.

~~Dress of the Boys.~~

The boys wear short, full, ballet-type skirts. These are white and plaited; they are made of heavy, coarse linen. The white shirt that they wear in covered with the gold-braided vest which is made of red or black velvet.

The shoes that they wear are made of white, soft skin and are of the moccasin type with the toes turned up to ~~X~~ points on which <sup>are</sup> fastened tassels which match the sashes at their waists and the bands on their caps. The long, bright-colored sashes are wrapped around the body twice and then looped at the left hip. In this loop or fold the men fasten their different badges or emblems of any lodges or clubs to which they belong.

The boys wear white caps very similar to the fez worn by the Turks. A band of ribbon which matches the sash and tassels of their shoes is placed around the cap. They wear three quarter length heavy woölen knit socks which turn down at the top, and are held there with a cord which is laced through the top. They are knit at home, and the same pair of socks may be worn for several generations for they are very heavy, and do not wear out. They are only worn on this one occasion during the year.



It is the custom for the boy to get the wool for his own sash. He is to shear the sheep, card the wool, and dye it; then his Mother may make the sash for him. They are hand-woven on a loom very much like the loom used by Spanish-American women in the Southwest.

#### Easter Visits.

The entire season is used to visit from one home to the other; greetings are exchanged. Toasts are drunk; the liquor that they use for this purpose is called mastixa, or ~~anacet~~ *(anacet?)*.

The women, and some of the men, drink a very thick, strong coffee, each cup of which has been made of a great quantity of coffee ground to a powder. The cream and sugar are boiled in the coffee as it is made. It is very strong and rich.

#### Church Service.

On Easter Sunday Morning, these Greek people go to their church service which begins at nine o'clock and lasts from two to two and one half hours. No outsiders are invited to this Greek Orthodox Church service, and it is a very secret service apparently for no one seems to have ever witnessed it except the Greeks who belong and they disdain from commenting on it.

#### Community Dinner.

Frequently, after the service on Easter Sunday, the women prepare a Community Dinner at some central point. Everyone is invited; Greek dishes are served, of course. Those who have attended these dinners report that there is an abundance of food, including chicken, pork, beef, and everything good to eat. The chicken prepared by the Greek women is exceptionally good. It is cooked in deep fat and fixed with a tomato paste base. This dinner and the visiting which continues throughout the day ends the Easter Celebration.

Easter is Favorite Naming time.

Greek children are not named until the god-parents have been selected, and until the Priest comes to hold services, which is usually the Easter time. For this reason the Easter season is a favorite naming season. They call a child 'couli', if a boy, and 'coula', if a girl, which mean 'baby' until it is named. Sometimes a Greek child is not named until it is five or six years of age.

God-parents.

Greek god-parents take their responsibilities very seriously. If the parents die the god-children are taken by the god-parents and raised as their own. If the god-parents are of two different homes, the children are divided between them.

The Greek Lodge.

These Greek people in the coal camp of Van Houten, New Mexico are, as you will find among all Greek people, very clannish. They stick by each other regardless of difficulty, or the seriousness of any trouble which they might get into. They do not welcome intrusion of outsiders and other peoples. These Greek people all belong to the Greek lodge. It holds its meetings once each month. This lodge has a Social Security System which really is successful. Each member contributes to a general fund according to his financial ability, and then in times of sickness, accident, trouble, or death the Lodge takes care of that person, or his family. Failure of a member to keep up his dues or contributions, or laxness in resuming his payments after enforced idleness, frequently causes dissention among the members, but the member at fault is eventually pulled back into line, and he finds himself doing his part.



When a death occurs in a family of this group, a year of mourning is required. All cloth and clothing of the family must be black. Rather than buy new cloth at a time like this, dye is purchased or made and everything in the house and all clothing is dyed black. The curtains, scarfs, table cloths, and bed coverings, in fact, everything must be made black. The clothing of the family also must be made black to show proper respect. Shirts, socks, ties, dresses, underwear, and every piece of clothing worn by the family must be black for the one year. The pictures in the house are all turned to face the wall, and are draped with black cloth. The family, during the year, shall not take part in any feasting or celebration, including the Easter festivities. Others may visit the bereaved home and offer consolation, at the Easter time especially.

If a married man dies, his single brother almost invariably marries the widowed woman. If the brother is already married, he takes care of his brother's widow as though she were his own sister.

In recent years a few exceptions are noted to the marriage rule, but it is the general custom for all marriages to be arranged. Frequently a man never sees his bride until his wedding day.

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It has been observed that these Greek people dress in white to attend the funeral of a friend or relative, and that the entire group that goes to the cemetery proceeds on foot, carrying their emblems and banners.



Numerous bright, dancing fires which dot the mountain sides all around the coal camp of Van Houten, New Mexico, from the eighth or ninth of December and last for several days, and the shadowy figures of men and boys, as they gayly and happily go back and forth to the fires, are the source of many queries from those unfamiliar with the Montenegrin way of preparing for the Christmas feast.

Using the old calendar, their Christmas falls on the fifteenth of December and the Montenegrins make preparations about a week before that date. It is practically impossible to keep the boys in school at this season for especially the older boys are to help with the preparations. They go up into the mountains and gather a large supply of wood. They next dig a hole or pit and fill it with wood and burn it. This fire is continued until the pit is full of live coals. Over this bed of coals the Christmas meat will be roasted.

The slaughter<sup>er</sup> of the animal which is to be roasted next takes place. It may be either a pig, a calf, or a sheep; usually the latter. Whichever it may be the animal is left whole and placed on a spit and hung over the fire. For the next three or four days and nights the animal is roasted, basted, turned, and slowly baked until deliciously done. The constant basting, the seasoning with herbs and salts, and this slow process of roasting results in a very excellently roasted piece of meat. Each family has a separate pit or roasting place, and the trips back and forth and the mingling of the men and boys whose pits are adjacent lend to a lively

time, and an early acquisition of the Christmas Spirit.

Then the day before their Christmas--December 14-- the roasted meat is brought down and placed on a large pine board; since the animal is still whole it cannot be placed on a plate because of the size and the pine board suffices.

The animal's mouth which has purposely been kept wide open, is filled with coins which are placed either loose in the mouth or in a glass. Gold coins were used until recent years when it has become impossible to secure them. Now silver coins are used. The money often amounts to \$10 or more. The remaining space in the mouth is filled with fruit.

Although it is usually arranged beforehand, the first boy visitor in the house is given an opportunity to prove his attainment of manhood and acquire the gift of money in the animal's mouth.

The boys are up and about early on Christmas morning. When the first boy enters the house he is given a large knife. He is supposed to decapitate the roasted animal with one stroke, and only one. If he fails he cannot try again that year. If he succeeds it is proof that he has attained maturity, and for having produced evidence of his manhood he is given the money which is in the mouth of the roasted animal.

Another version of this part of the ceremony is told this way. The animal's mouth is kept open but left empty until the young man has succeeded in decapitating it. When he has proved his manhood by cutting the head off at one stroke, he repays the owner for the animal by placing coins



or paper money which he has earned himself, and an orange in the open mouth. The owner and his wife have a nice present ready to present to the young man.

~~Visiting and Food.~~

This early part of the ceremony starts off the day in which feasting and visiting will predominate. Meals are not served at a table as the American Christmas dinner. However, the table is kept full of foods: meats, breads, cookies, cakes, raisins, nuts, candies, and fruits. If you are a guest, you are welcome to partake of any or all of it. Each guest and visitor is met at the door by the entire family and every member of the family kisses the guest on both cheeks.

Besides the foods on the table, hot foods are brought from the kitchen and the guests are expected to serve themselves, to eat heartily, and to stand around or sit around and visit.

One very rich food which is served is on the order of an American jelly-roll. The dough is very elastic, and is pulled over a table which has been covered with a clean, white cloth, until it is very thin. An expert cook can pull it so thin that it is possible to read newsprint through one thickness of it. This dough when thin enough is spread with a paste made of nuts, dates, raisins, and butter which have been ground up so fine that it is a paste. This is then rolled into a good-sized loaf and baked very slowly. It is delicious but exceedingly rich, and a small piece is quite sufficient for those unfamiliar with it.

Much toasting, health-drinking is participated in, each

glass being kept well-filled from the supply of wine in a large pitcher or container on the table. Everyone participates in the drinking, even the smaller boys. Everyone is happy and gay. Each member of every family takes part in this and all other feasts and parties among the Montenegrins.

#### Christmas Night Dance.

The Montenegrins have a dance which they thoroughly enjoy. Everyone goes, and young and old take part in the dancing. The people come to the dance in their regular Americanized dress.

The room for the dance is prepared by scattering straw over the floor. This is done so that the room will resemble more nearly the stable where Jesus was born. The room is lighted with candles which are placed up high in solid containers which are in no danger of upsetting when the dancing later gets to a hilarious stage. Music for the dance is made by chanting, led by a leader who is joined at intervals by the group on the floor. The chant is rhythmatically controlled by a musician who saws with a bow on a "gusla".

Gusla - musical instrument.

A "gusla" is a hand-made one-stringed instrument with a very low growling tone. It resembles an old-fashioned mandolin with a bowl-shaped body, and a very long neck, without frets however. The back of this neck is a place where the maker can display his artistry as a woodcarver. Some of them are very elaborate. This gusla is usually made of pine or spruce wood.



The musician pulls the bow back and forth, and runs his fingers up and down the one string causing the instrument to emit the most mournful wails imaginable. At certain stages of the music and the dance, the string of the 'gusla' is picked instead of bowed.

After the dancing starts, it continues on uninterrupted until midnight. All dancers join hands; they dance, swing, twist, and turn. A leader chants a mysterious tune and all seem to know just when to enter into the chanting. And without any visible signal throughout the dance everyone on the floor jumps into the air and clicks his heels together. Some of the dancers are very prolific at jumping and even many of the older dancers can raise into the air twenty to thirty inches from the floor. One particular jump includes a twisting of the body which looks very difficult to do, but it seems to be accomplished easily by these Montenegrin people at this dance.

As some become overcome with fatigue, they drop out, panting, and very red of face, and others take their places in the line of dance. This shuffling dance goes back and forth, in and out, and as the evening progresses the tempo increases gradually until by the end of the evening it is a frenzy of whirling, lightning-like twisting, and jumping that should make them glad that twelve o'clock is the deadline for the event.

Exactly at midnight, the chanting is finished, the 'gusla' is silenced, the dancing is over, and the lights are blown out, everyone in the crowd assisting in darkening the room by blowing out as many candles as he can.

Attempting to ignore their fatigue, the group goes on its way home continuing the jollity as long as possible, each one laughing and shouting to his neighbor until the last person has disappeared into his home.

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#### Gifts.

Gifts are exchanged by these Montenegrin people of Van Houten at the Christmas season, but this is not a custom brought to their new homes from their native country, but one which has been adopted from their American neighbors.

Most of the gift exchanges are made on the American Christmas--December 25--rather than on their old calendar Christmas day.

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