

EXPLORING OUR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY

Caroling in the Christmas Season

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Every year during the anticipation and preparation for Christmas Holidays, we recollect, nostalgically the traditions associated with this holiday. We reminisce about the many happy past festivities, and everyone hopes to celebrate this holiday as marvelously as possible in one's close family circle.

Caroling was always an important component of Christmas holidays.* Just as traditions associated with Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's, Epiphany Eve, and Epiphany were of a more solemn and reverential nature, caroling was conducted more merrily, joyfully and playfully. Even though today caroling traditions have lost some of its magic and mystery with which they were bestowed during their origins, it's still worthwhile to learn how important they were for Ukrainians throughout many centuries.

Ancient Ukrainian carols, as many other traditions practiced at Christmas time, have their origins in antiquity, in the pre Christian days and are considered to be the oldest example of Ukrainian oral literature. The settled, agrarian mode of life of ancient people of Ukraine, in pre Christian days, impacted on the formation of their religious outlook, beliefs, social structure, and traditions. Ancient man, in awe of nature and its powers, worshipped natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon, rain, water. He was grateful to them, but at the same time feared nature's unexpected changes which could bring destruction and disaster. In order to attract nature's powers for his benefit and preserve nature's regular cycles, man created rituals which were performed during auspicious moments of the year. These rituals expressed gratefulness, praise and appealed for favors and benevolence. The winter solstice was one of those auspicious moments. With the coming of Christianity to Ukraine and with the celebration of the birth of Christ during the Winter Solstice, some of the pre Christian rituals were adapted by the church into the Christmas holidays including caroling.

Themes in Ukrainian carols are manifold. Many of course deal with the birth

of Christ, marking this joyful celebration. But, the ancient carols glorified natural phenomena, as well as the landowner, the farmer, his children, their noble traits of character, their hard work, their generosity, and proclaimed well wishings for the future. In time, other themes were added dealing with Ukrainian history of the princely days. Through the centuries, carols underwent superimposings, thematic enrichment and with the coming of Christianity, ancient pagan carols were adjusted to carry Christian themes. New carols were created glorifying the birth of Christ, Mother of God, Saint Peter etc., including apocryphal elements. Some included national and political elements.

Ancient man believed in the "power of the word" considering that the rhythmic repetition of incantations, entreaties, wishes had the power to bring about what one asked for. It was the mission of the carolers, by going from home to home, to express in song good luck wishes, happiness, great accomplishments, bountiful harvest. By singing, they brought the listeners hope that what was expressed in song or word might come true. This is why, in past days no one went to bed on Christmas Eve. All impatiently waited for the carolers to come in order to hear singular wishes, maybe unreal and illusionary, but enjoyable and delightful because it strengthened their hope in the possibility of the fulfillment of something desirable, unusual, and worthy. Carolers were highly respected and were treated not as the neighboring villagers but as emissaries from another world who come to bring good tidings, good fortune, and a prosperous future. For this reason carolers dressed in outlandish costumes and wore masks so that they would not be recognized.

In contemporary days, caroling does not have the magical qualities it once had. We are always in a hurry, and have no time to engross ourselves into the meaningful words of the carols. Sometimes, the coming of the carolers are treated as a burden and not as a joyful moment. Caroling today concentrates on the collecting of funds, true for a good cause. This deprived caroling of its beauty,



Christmas Post card, fragment, Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford

magic and deeper understanding of this tradition. As an example of how once caroling affected the listener I will quote a passage from *The Enchanted Desna* by Oleksander Dovzhenko – his childhood recollection.

"Let us come inside for some caroling!" A young girl's voice called from outside... "Go ahead, sing!" Mother responded... "For whom? For Sashko!.." "Young Sashko, walked around the fair; Holy Night", - four girls began to sing at once. I don't know whether it was because of the frost or the girls or the words of this carol sung on a winter night, but the song rang so resonantly and clearly that the world, even to a child, suddenly seemed so solemn it took my breath away. Pressed to the window's edge, hidden under the draped windows with *the rushnyky*, I listened carefully. They sang about my fate, slowly and deliberately; their words, it seemed, reached back at least 700 years... A second, then a third group of girls began to sing. Oh the things I heard about myself. I rounded up so many armies the ground nearly caved in beneath their weight. I crashed through gates of foreign cities, plowed fields with gray eagles, and sowed fields with small pearls. I built strong bridges out of the

finest wood, spread carpets of rare silk, and courted a maiden from far beyond the Danube, a king's daughter... When I rode through forests, the forests rustled. When I crossed bridges, they rang out. When I passed through cities, their people ran out, greeting me..." Oh Holy Night!"**

Memories of the young lad about this caroling remained with him all his life. Who knows if the fate the carolers sang out for him during this magical night did not influence his life's work.

Caroling was and is a beautiful Ukrainian tradition. How splendid it is that we still adhere to it to this day even though in a much simpler way. ❖

**Ukrainians have two categories of Christmas holiday songs: the koliady (carols) and the sbchedrivky (well-wishing songs). The first category – the koliady are sung during Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, etc. The sbchedrivky traditionally were sung at New Year's and Epiphany celebration. But, this varied from region to region. In time with traditions diminishing the two groups of songs were interchanged and sung as the carolers wished.*

***Dovzhenko's memoir translated by D. Orlovsky*

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