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# Celebrating Christmas in Sandy

BY TYANCE FIDDLER

*"I glanced out the frosty window to see the smoke coming from all of the chimneys. It was a beautiful and comforting sight."*

 The van was filled to the top with boxes and suitcases; the house was locked up, and the cats looked after. We were finally ready to head out for our Christmas holiday in Sandy Lake.

Our drive to Red Lake from Sioux Lookout, the first leg of our journey, is always action packed with quarrels over batteries and walk-mans and occasional mishaps such as my sister's mousse leaking and smelling up the whole car. We arrived in Red Lake late that evening, all of us excited that our hotel room had cable.

The plane landed gently early the next morning in Sandy Lake. The drive to "The River" section of Sandy took about five minutes and as we rode up the bumpy road in my uncle Clovis' paddy wagon (Clovis Meekis is a Sandy Lake First Nations Constable), I glanced out the frosty window to see the smoke coming from all of the chimneys. It was a beautiful and comforting sight.

Christmas Eve arrived and everyone was buzzing about the skidoo train. At 8:30 p.m. I looked out the window and saw faint twinkling lights at the end of the river. I grabbed my sister and we both went outside to watch the 123 skidoos' red and white lights twist and turn along the ice. We stood and waved to people we knew and to people we didn't know. It was probably as much fun for us as it was for them.

crackers and this indicated a person who had passed away in 1991. Mike Meekis, Julie Mamakeesic, and Fraser Meekis then welcomed the spirits. After they finished, the plates were passed, one at a time, around the circle. As each plate passed, we took a few candies then passed it on. Most people ended up leaving with a fair sized bag of candy.

In the week ahead feasts were held every day for the spirits that had been welcomed back on Christmas Day. There was an organized sliding party on a different hill every night of the week. The most fun and most popular was the yearly event at Randy Linklater's house. My cousin Jennifer and I arrived near the end when many of the kids and adults had gone home. There was still, however, a line-up to go down, and so we stood at the top of the lit hill and helped ourselves to the moose meat that was cooking in a huge kettle on top of a bonfire. We stood close to the fire and kept warm until we were coaxed into going down at least once. We hesitantly lay across the tire tube. Then came a push from behind, and before we knew it we had flown down the smooth surface and were lying at the bottom, laughing hysterically, rubbing our heads which we'd banged against each other as well as our butts where we'd tried to cushion the blow of landing. It was a ride we'll never forget! As we left the hill, we could hear shouts of laughter from the adults who had taken over the hill for some serious sliding.

Finally, New Year's Eve came and the week-long festivities were coming to an end. The sweets feast was held again and this time we bid farewell to the spirits who would come back and join us again next year. There was another skidoo train and the evening finished off with a dance at the Sports Complex and fireworks at midnight.

On New Year's morning, we went down to the church to celebrate the new year. The night earlier, our family had sent little unwrapped presents. In return, we each got a gift from somebody in the community. All the presents were tied and dangling from a string which was strung back and forth across the ceiling. After the service, the choir distributed the gifts. It was the perfect ending to a perfect week.

We left two days later and as the plane lifted off the ground, I smiled knowing I was lucky to have such a great place to go during Christmas and knowing, too, I would enjoy many more there in the future.



Since Christmas in Sandy Lake is celebrated for a whole week, excitement was in the air. At the stroke of midnight we all jumped into our boots, grabbed the nearest jacket, and ran outside to listen to the official starting of Christmas. First we heard just one, then after that another, and within seconds, the air was full of gunshots. The echoes could be heard from across the river mixing with other shots going off all over the community. As this four to five minute display continued, I recalled fears I had when I was little, of somebody accidentally shooting Santa Claus. It was quite a worry, and it was a comfort knowing that the radio announcers told people to please watch out for Santa Claus when shooting their guns. Although some families open their presents after this, we wait until Christmas morning.

After opening presents, we went to church. Someone made a huge birthday cake for Jesus and we all got a slice. We then skidooed home and I decided to start Christmas week with a good feast. At my aunt's house (Rhoda McPherson) we turned on the radio to find out when and where today's feasts were. A number of cousins got together and we all headed off to the closest feast. Boy were we in for a surprise! We were seated immediately and given a choice of moose, fish, rabbit, duck, meatloaf, beaver, goose, ham, a variety of vegetables, mashed potatoes, rice, macaroni salads, as well as a choice of macaroni, rice, rabbit, or duck soup. To top it off, we could have cake, Jell-o, fruit, homemade blueberry sauce, an assortment of pies, or many other pastries for dessert. We walked out of there with our stomachs bulging and slowly waddled home. Although there were usually three or four different feasts going on every day, we decided to stick with just one and maybe try again tomorrow.

At about nine that evening, family, relatives, and neighbours gathered at Julie Mamakeesic's house to welcome departed spirits that would be joining us for the Christmas week. This sweets feast combines traditional spiritual beliefs and Christianity and began around the time my great-grandfather, Adam Fiddler, accepted Christian faith for his people. We set a large tablecloth on the floor and everyone gathered around it sitting on the floor or, if you were lucky, on a chair. People put the names of parents, wives, husbands, or loved ones who had passed away on a piece of paper and put that on a plate. They then filled the plate with candies and sweets like fruit, cookies, gum, jellybeans, hard candy, and chocolate. One plate was placed on the table with nothing but soda