

No Christmas Without Mummers

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Valda, a kindergarten teacher in St. John's, Newfoundland, watched as her mother put on long woolen socks inside out. Then, her mother pulled on a big orange rubber jacket and bibbed oilskin pants. Taking two pillows from the bed, she pushed them down inside the big green pants. A pillowcase with holes cut out for eyes went over her head. A blue wool scarf kept her mask in place. She finished her costume with some funny red gloves and a pair of Valda's dad's steel-toed work boots.

Valda's mom and dad were getting ready to perform as mummies. The word comes from the Old French word *momer*, meaning to wear a mask or pantomime. "Mummer" means a masked or costumed merry-maker.

These people disguise themselves by wearing old clothes, hoods, and masks sometime during the 12 days of Christmas (the period from Christmas day through January 6), and usually on the night of "Old Twelfth," which Newfoundlanders call Old Christmas Day. At that time, the mummies go out to visit the homes of neighbors and friends.

Knocking on a door, they will call out, "Any mummies 'lowed in?" They have practiced disguising their voices by speaking from deep in their throats. With musical instruments in hand, they play, sing, dance, and "carry on." The goals

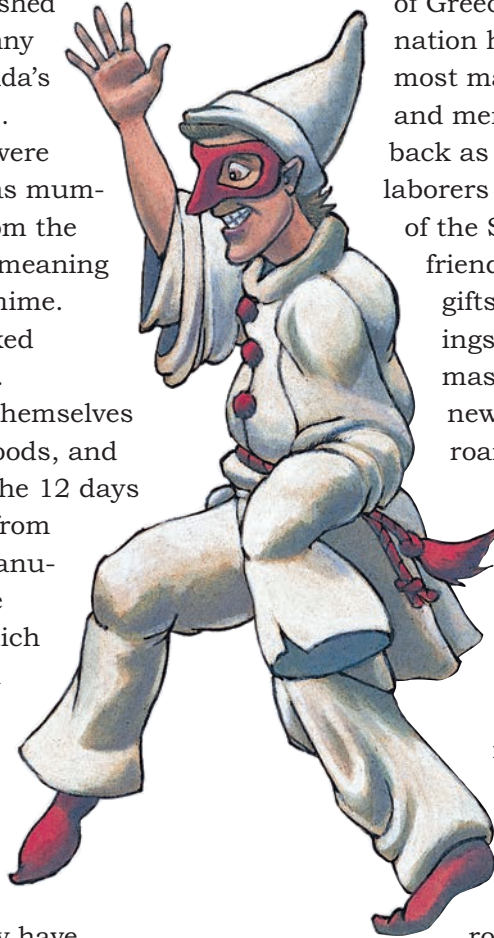
are to keep their hosts from guessing who they are and to have fun. Christmas cake, cookies, and a glass of blueberry, dogberry, or Purity syrup (a Newfoundland sweet drink) are their reward.

Mummary, or "jannyng," is a very old Newfoundland custom that English and Irish settlers brought with them. Tracing further through history, we find that mummary goes back to the pagan days of Greece and Rome. Every nation had its festivals, most marked by parades and merrymaking. As far back as 400 B.C., Roman laborers observing the feast of the Saturnalia visited friends and exchanged gifts as New Year greetings. It was a time when masters gave their slaves new robes and everyone roamed the streets

wearing "dress-up" outfits.

It's important to be completely covered (face, hands, and body), when you perform mummary. In the past, months before Christmas, men would go to the mills and get rope yarn. Separating

the strands, they would use them to make whiskers for their costumes. Men will sometimes dress as women, and women as men. Even gestures and body





movements must be changed so that people who have grown up, gone to school, and worked together will not be able to guess each other's identity.

At one time, there were three types of mummery. The oldest form was the parade. In St. John's, the Mummers' Parade was held every year. Because they felt hidden by their disguises, merrymakers often got rowdy. As a result, sometimes someone got hurt. After a man was killed, the parade was banned for a time.

The second type of mummery, the performance visit, involved a group of mummery going to someone's house and putting on a small play. It was always the same — the hero was killed by the

bad guy. Not to worry! A "doctor" would bring him back to life. Before they left, the group would ask for money. This practice stopped before World War I, more than 90 years ago.

The third type, the house visit, was the most popular. Newfoundland is made up of close-knit communities. Life in the past was harsh and Christmas was a time of great celebration — a full 12 days of freedom from rough physical work for men and women. It was also a celebration of the community's survival through another year. Unfortunately, these performances, too, often turned

violent. Some mummers carried “splits,” large sticks, and fought with other groups. Horns and tails from goats, sheep, and caribou, as well as their skins and those of seals, were used to make the costumes. A few even used the dried heads of bulls and cows as masks. Because their costumes were wild and because mummers damaged houses, wharves, and fences, people were afraid of them. In fact, mummers were once used as bogeymen to frighten children.

Bud Davidge and Sim Savory, two songwriters from the Newfoundland

singing duo called Simani, are credited with reviving the ancient festivals. In 1973, their humorous “Mummer’s Song” was released. Written in Newfoundland dialect, it cautioned, “Be careful the lamp and hold on to the stove./Don’t swing Granny hard ’cause you know that she’s old.”

Today, most mummery is fun. It’s a way for close-knit people to exchange visits and play the game of “Guess who?” Instead of sticks, mummers carry accordions and guitars. They bring good cheer, adding laughter and merrymaking to the holiday season.

