

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Are You Ready for Christmas?

It is perhaps a bit early to ask this, but the Holidays do tend to sneak up on us. Would it surprise you to know that our ancestors back in the Old Country were also under pressure as they undertook their preparations for Christmas?

Take away our modern-day shopping frenzy and all the glitz and Christmas was in many ways a much bigger deal for our forebears in centuries past than it is for us (with the possible exception of the little kids). It was of course *the celebration* of the year and it came at a time when they weren't so overwhelmed with field work and other pressing seasonal jobs, and therefore able to accommodate the extra work it entailed. Preparations for the Yuletide Season were huge—there was the house to thoroughly scrub clean and properly (yet simply) decorate, food and special treats to make, *Juleøl* or Christmas Beer to brew (from scratch) and yes, even baths to take!

Since the custom was to provide *sju slags kaker* (seven different kinds of “*kaker*” or cookies, but not like ours—think *krumkake*, *sandbakkels*, *fattigman*, etc.) in addition to the rest of feast, the farm wife had, as always, a great deal to do. Remember that everything had to be made by hand, from scratch, using ingredients and raw materials almost all of which they had produced themselves on their own little farms! And also, be aware that they didn't even have cast iron wood stoves—everything was cooked and baked at the hearth of the corner fireplace!

Because of this there was a great sense of relief when each holiday task had been completed and I firmly believe that those of us who live in the modern world can't begin to understand what it meant for them when the time came to say: ***“No æ det gjort t' Jol!”***

The literal meaning of this phrase, word for word, is “Now is that done for Christmas” or as we'd say it, “Now that's done for Christmas” (The *t'* is a contraction of *til* which means for or until.) If there is anyone reading this who isn't familiar with Norwegian or the West Telemark dialects of our forefathers, don't feel bad. I'm far from fluent in them myself, unfortunately, which is probably why the words and phrases that I have learned are so precious to me and why I feel it is so important to share them.

I first heard this once popular expression from my Dad, who explained what it meant and its significance in the lives of our ancestors, and after his passing my uncle Gifford fine-tuned the pronunciation for me. It is a noteworthy saying which has become one of my favorites.

Because it was such an important and powerful phrase it's not surprising that it outgrew the Christmas Season. Dad told me that the old ones would use it in a humorous fashion upon the completion of any major job. When they had finished planting the corn, or putting up a crop of hay, or gotten through with “thrashing” they could say amusingly (yet very thankfully), *“Ja, no æ det gjort t' Jol!”* (And I bet they felt just as good about it. Growing up on a dairy farm, I can fully understand and appreciate their sense of accomplishment and relief.)

We hope this very brief taste of the Christmas customs of our ancestors has piqued your interest. Developed over many centuries and influenced by pagan rituals, religious imperatives, and folk beliefs these traditions are quite diverse and fascinating. Their breadth was such that the need arose for two Christmas Eves and two Christmas Days! (Naturally there will be more on this later.) Last December we shared some Christmas memories, old and not so old (which we hope were well received) and our plan is to continue this very new tradition by recounting more local memories and customs, as well as those from the Old Country, each December for many years to come. It is a deep well with much to explore below the surface.

We will leave you now with the following age-old Holiday Greeting:

Glædlig Jol og godt Nytt Aar!

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, December 2018