

The Hidden History of Christmas Carols

by Carolyn Emerick

A note to the reader: Never has it been so evident that history can sometimes be murky and difficult to wade through than during my quest to discover the roots of Christmas caroling! Different sources give different information, conflicting dates, and varying histories. Ordinarily I would not open with a disclaimer. But, under the circumstances, if the reader were to look up this information on their own, they might find answers different than what I've said here. So, I will endeavor to weed through it all and give my own assessment of the material. And, I will try to be clear about where my information came from by citing all sources. - Carolyn

The story of Christmas caroling is full of unexpected surprises. The practice itself has gone through many changes over the centuries, and our perception of caroling today is based only on the very recent history. We think of Christmas caroling as a wholesome, and even religious, activity. Caroling seems to speak of the beauty, innocence, and magic of the Christmas season. However, in researching this practice, I have discovered that caroling was not as innocent as we might think. In fact, the act of caroling was actively combatted by the Church for hundreds of years.

Uncovering the origins of caroling has proven difficult. Some sources give the 14th or 15th centuries as the earliest date for caroling. I believe the reason for this is because this is the period when caroling began to be adopted by the church, and this is when carols first began to be written down. However, there is much evidence that caroling was around long before that. We don't have written carols from the early periods, but what we do have are edicts from the Church and recorded sermons which make reference to caroling.

In his book, *The Book of Christmas Folklore*, Tristram P. Coffin says that "For seven centuries a formidable series of denunciations and prohibitions was fired forth by Catholic authorities, warning Everyman to 'flee wicked and lecherous songs, dancings, and leapings'" (p98). Apparently early carols could be quite lewd. They were originally associated with dance as well as song. The caroling dancers often went around town in costume, and it is related to the custom of mumming (which is most well known in England, but there are mumming traditions on the continent as well). Coffin mentions that this revelry was considered so offensive to the Church that they referred to caroling as "sinful traffic" and issued decrees against it in 1209 A.D. and 1435 A.D. It must have been a good time, for clerics and priests who found themselves caught up in the fun received a stern scolding in one document from 1338 A.D. They are accused of neglecting their clerical duties "while indulging in dances and masques; for prowling the city 'streets and lanes' 'day and night'; as well as leading a riotous existence" (p99).

The Church viewed these activities as “very remnant of pagan custom” (p99). But, more than that, the street revelry could get out of control. Alcohol was usually flowing during caroling festivities. Just as drunks are known for breaking into bar fights today, drunken caroling could get rowdy and even violent. “When a fellow named Gilbert de Foxlee tried to break up the dancing, he was stabbed in the back with a dagger, cut in the right arm with a sword, and slashed on the left leg with an axe. He died after eight weeks of infection and pain” (Coffin, p 99). Evidently carolers were well armed!

These edicts and bans on caroling go back even further in time. Sandra M. Salla is a contributor to a fantastic resource called *Medieval Folklore*, which is an encyclopedia of folkloric terms. In her entry for “Carols,” Salla says that “between 600 and 1500 C.E. the Church formally banned the dancing of carols on church grounds” and that numerous informal “decrees, sermons, and exempla were written condemning the activity” (Salla, p61). Some authors attribute caroling to purely Christian origins, and begin the history of caroling with those written down in a Christian context. However, this is contradicted by the evidence. We see that the Church long considered it a pagan practice, as evidenced by the wording in the edicts condemning caroling. Also, that Salla mentions the edicts against caroling begin in the 6th century is telling. The 6th and 7th centuries were the period of conversion for the Anglo-Saxons in England. The fact that edicts against caroling begin to appear in the record at the same time as the conversion period is circumstantial evidence hinting that caroling had pagan roots and was in existence long before conversion.

But, those records do not explain *why* caroling was considered to have pagan connotations. Jacqueline Simpson, a scholar who specializes in mediaeval English and Scandinavian history, explores this in her wonderful book, *European Mythology*. Simpson explains that it can sometimes be difficult to determine which customs actually stem from pagan tradition because Church clerics were quick to condemn almost anything as pagan. She explains that customs involving drunkenness, cross dressing (usually in play acting and carnival type festivities), or elements that expressed sexuality were described as “devilish” even if there was no devil involved. (Which is not to imply pre-Christian Europeans were devil-worshippers, as pagans had no concept of the devil. However, pagan deities and spiritual beings were referred to as devils by the Church). Simpson goes on to explain that even if folk festivals evolved from a pagan origin, connections to pre-Christian deities were often so far removed as to be completely obscured. What did remain, however, are fairies and other beings considered to be lower spirits (Simpson, pp118-120).

One example where a song and dance tradition similar to caroling is connected to a pre-Christian spiritual activity is in Romanian Căluș dance which survived through modern times. Dancers dress in costume, like modern English mummers and early carolers, and go around the village singing and dancing. Călușari, members of the all-male dance troupe, were once a secret society which appears to have been openly associated with paganism, as their members were exempt from partaking in mass. This group of dancers had another purpose other than

entertainment. They were said to possess secret charms of healing, and were known for banishing evil spirits. The Călușari went door to door during mid-Winter offering their services and expected to be welcome and generously compensated. If a home refused them entry, a curse would befall the homeowner (Simpson, pp121-126).

If this reminds you of Halloween, there's a good reason for that! The mid-Winter holiday we now call Christmas, but which was known as Yule in pre-Christian England and various other names in different cultures, was known to be a period of high spiritual activity – just as old Samhain was. This notion has faded away in our modern perception of Christmas, but it lingered on in Halloween. European folklore is full of references to spiritual activity during Yule-tide. In fact, it was regarded as a spiritually dangerous time in both Celtic and Germanic cultures. So, it is not that far of a stretch to wonder if the Romanian Călușari tradition (which lasted well into the 19th century and perhaps later) gives us a glimpse of the earlier mumming and caroling traditions and speculate on a long lost spiritual connotation.

Further, just as the Călușari request a reward or threaten a curse (trick or treat?) early caroling traditions are almost always associated with demanding to be rewarded with food and drink or risk some kind of retribution. Contemporary carolers still sing “Here we go a-wassailing” wherein there is a line requesting “now bring us some figgy pudding” and carolers threaten “we won’t go until we get some.” How many of us have sung that line without a second thought? A survey of medieval carols will demonstrate that the request for food and drink is not unique to this song. Wassailing, a medieval term for caroling, is itself a reference to the alcoholic beverage wassail. The word derives from the Old English term “waes-heal” meaning “good health,” a greeting or toast (Baker, p83). Wassail is a medieval mulled wine (heated with spices) which was commonly served to carolers.

Another reason to consider that there may be some connection between caroling and trick-or-treating is that caroling was done throughout the year, not simply at Christmas. This is mentioned in numerous sources, and there are accounts of caroling at other holidays in early folklore journals. One in particular which caught my eye is by Trefor M. Owen, *The Celebration of Candlemas in Wales*, published in Folklore journal. In this scholarly article about the Candlemas holiday the word “carol” is mentioned seventy-two times, emphasizing the overwhelming evidence of caroling during a holiday other than Christmas – and yet another one with known pagan origins (Candlemas being the Christianized version of the old Celtic pagan Imbolc).

Owen shares one account of Welsh Candlemas caroling wherein the revelers go around town and sing outside of homes. This sounds innocent enough... at first. What ensues is the carolers sing bawdy songs about the Virgin Mary (no *wonder* the Church considering caroling sacrilegious!) and hurl insults at the home-owners! The home-owners are then obliged to return the insults to the carolers. Whichever group out-wits the other in verse would be declared the winner. If the revelers won, they must be allowed inside and given food and beverage (Owen

pp242-243). And, interestingly, Owen mentions that wassailing was done at Halloween as well as Christmas and Candlemas and other holidays (p247). So, we have a caroling tradition that involves costumes and demanding reward in the form of food or a risk threat. And, we also discover that caroling was done on Halloween in Britain. Could modern trick-or-treating and Christmas caroling have evolved from the same root practice many hundreds of years ago?

The practice of caroling went through a transformation between the High Middle Ages (12th and 13th centuries) and the Renaissance period. As explained, the Church categorically rejected the practice due to the “close relationship between ‘heathen dancing’ and witchcraft” (Coffin, p99). Eventually, church leaders adopted an “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” approach. St. Francis of Assisi was one of the major proponents of replacing the old “riotous carols with ones more appropriate” in Italy, which then spread through Europe (Coffin, pp99-100). Eventually, this led to a “great age of carol writing” between the years 1400 to 1650 (Baker, p81).

But, during the same period caroling was actively suppressed by the Puritans (insert joke about Puritans always ruining all the fun here). A little known fact about the history of witch trials is that caroling came up in trial testimony. Salla says “in witchcraft trials of the sixteenth century and later, accused witches often confessed to caroling” (p62). Interestingly, just as witches were accused of inverting Christian practices like the mass and Sabbath rituals, there was apparently some notion of a witch’s carol, which inverted the carol song and dance commonly practiced by the rest of the peasantry (Salla, p62).

Caroling evolved much over the years and seems to have gone through many stages. With the end of one stage came the beginning of another. The Puritan’s and their influence faded, and the Victoria era began. Like so many other elements of our culture, this is from whence we inherit our current image of Christmas caroling. The Victorians had a penchant for romanticizing and idealizing nostalgic customs of the past. And so, while other aspects of caroling such as its association with dance and other holidays faded away, the Victorians kept it very much alive at Christmas, albeit in a version very tame compared to the original. It is only in recent years that the popularity of Christmas caroling has become in danger of extinction all together. Today the custom is mostly seen in shopping malls sung by children or church groups. Will caroling disappear from Western culture all together? Maybe it’s time reintroduce the wassail and liven up the party!