



St Blasius Church

Crib Festival



In the year 1223, Francis of Assisi became worried that many of the ordinary people in the Church were beginning to forget the true meaning of Christmas. It had become a mid-winter feast and celebration that had little religious content, apart from a Mass to mark the holy day (holiday). So, at the midnight service held at the town of Greccio, he had one of the brothers of his order, Friar John, prepare a simple crib with a manger and a real ox and ass. At the service, Francis read the gospel story of the birth of Jesus with such devotion that many in the congregation thought that they had seen the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child at the crib. From that simple start began the tradition of churches displaying a scene of the manger at Christmas time. From Italy it quickly spread throughout Europe.

In many parts of the world crib festivals are held which involve most of the local community. In Seville, in Spain, there is a market in November which sells nothing but crib figures, including working models of the whole town of Bethlehem which include characters chopping wood, drawing water, and other activities. In Krakow, Poland, there is a crib festival every other year where the cribs are modelled on aspects of the cathedral of the city with a small crib scene included at some point in the model. These models can be from a few inches high to up to six feet and are largely made from coloured foil over cardboard. They are all displayed during the festival, prizes are awarded for the best examples, and the winning models are then placed in the local museum.

Cribs were popular in this country until the English civil war when the Puritans banned them as being idolatrous. It is only really in the past hundred years that they have begun to appear in our churches again. Nativity plays are in part derived from the old medieval miracle plays produced by the trade guilds in some of the cities of Europe, where each guild performed their play, based on some incident from the Bible, on carts that were paraded through the city. The particular plays which showed the birth of Jesus became separated from other miracle plays and were performed during the Christmas period, being, in effect, living cribs.

Advent calendars, used to countdown the twenty four days in December that precede Christmas, were originally scenes of a crib with windows that opened, one each day, displaying Christmas symbols. Sadly, nowadays they seem to be of cartoon characters like Homer Simpson or Spiderman with a chocolate hidden under each numbered window. Even those which have a proper Christmas theme still seem to include chocolates.

In 1953, Pope Plus XII, worried that the Christmas tree was taking over from the Christmas Crib in family homes at Christmastide, instigated an association to propagate the Crib again. This became the Universal Federation of the Crib and has members in most Christian countries.

Different areas of the world specialize in particular types of Crib. In Santiago de Compostella in Spain there is a street of crib makers who work in jet; a difficult and expensive craft as can jet split and crack easily when being carved. Germany specialises in carved wood cribs, especially Spinne (Spider's web cribs), and Pyramids which rotate powered by the heat of candles. There are many plaster model cribs, and parts of Italy produce cribs made in glass. The Anglo-Celtic Society of Nativitists, the English speaking branch of the Federation of the Crib, specialises in padded, embroidered nativity scenes.

St Blasius Crib Festival is now in it's fourth year. The festival runs from Friday through to Monday over the last weekend in November.

In 2008 there were over 70 cribs on display and come in all shapes and sizes from tiny miniature cribs to cribs nearly five feet tall. They come from all corners of the world and some are very old having been owned by families for generations.

In addition Ray Dyke built a model of "Bethlehem" and Andrea Tibbitts created a theme "Whilst shepherds watched their flocks by night", both of which added an extra dimension to the festival. The following pages show pictures taken at the 2008 Festival.



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Crib Displays





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Bethlehem &
Whilst Shepherds Watch Their
Flocks By Night
By
Ray Dyke & Andrea Tibbitts





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