

## A Yorker Christmas Eve, 1783



*This article, written by Dr. Elinor Kyte Senior, appeared in the June, 1986 edition of "The Loyalist Gazette". It was on Christmas Eve, 1783 that the KRRNY received news that the regiment was to be disbanded. This article describes the difficult conditions that the troops and their families faced in Montreal as they returned to civilian life.*

What was Montreal like 202 years ago on Christmas Eve, the very night that some 549 officers and men of the King's Royal Regiment of New York were informed that their regiment was disbanded, they were off the imperial military budget, the war lost in the revolting states and their homes and lands permanently confiscated by the revolutionaries? It was a sober and sombre moment for these men, their wives and children, who made up a total of 1,462 people, all squeezed into the newly-built Montreal barracks that faced Jacques Cartier Square. The Montreal commandant, Brig.-General Barry St. Leger, was quite candid about their condition. He had reported earlier to Governor Frederick Haldimand that he had "contracted the Royal Yorkers into as narrow a compass as possible on this side of misery" in order to make a little room for the incoming companies of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of British regulars. To make matters worse on that Christmas Eve in 1783, most of the wives and children of the Royal Yorkers "were down with measles or smallpox".

For the officers, men and their wives and children, the news of the disbanding of the Loyalist regiments that had fought out of Montreal for seven long years had long been expected; but that did not soften the blow when it fell. Montreal on Christmas Eve in 1783 was, in many respects, like the Montreal of 1985. Its winter was cold, jobs were scarce, and the ranks of the unemployed were swelling. Not only were the Royal Yorkers out of work; there were another 152 refugee Loyalists who had sought safety in the city, bringing with them their wives and some 293 children. Other unexpected elements were turned loose that Christmas Eve. These were reduced British and German troops. The British army that had come to America to help quell the rebels to the south might well have been called a "German" army, for in some cases the number of German troops out-numbered the British. Burgoyne's army of 1777 had some 4,000 German-speaking military mercenaries. General Johann Friedrich von Specht, the Montreal commandant, carried on his correspondence with the Swiss governor, Sir Frederick Haldimand, in French. And when the German troops marched out of barracks in July to make room for the Royal Yorkers, they left behind at least thirty German soldiers who opted for discharge in Montreal.

This Montreal of 1783 was a walled city of less than 8,000 souls which had, over the past seven years, experienced terrific movements of soldiers, Indians and refugee Loyalist families in and out of its gates. Its social amenities were few, but somehow in the wartime atmosphere of sharing and make-do, the hordes of transients were cared for. There were four Roman Catholic churches and church authorities lent the

Recollet Chapel to the Protestants. Here the Swiss Chaplain to the troops, David Chabrand Delisle, ministered to them. By 1783 he had been joined by the Anglican Loyalist Chaplain, John Stuart, and later by the Presbyterian Loyalist Chaplain, John Bethune. For the sick there was a single civilian hospital, the Hotel Dieu. For the military there was a general garrison hospital run by army surgeon Charles Blake, but it too was to be reduced. This caused the Montreal commandant to complain bitterly that its reduction had "difficulted" him as there were still five patients to be cared for and smallpox had spread its usual terror at Christmas.

Montreal's first newspaper, the Gazette, run by the rebel printer, Fleury Mesplet, had folded when Governor Haldimand had plunked Mesplet into jail on charges of treason. Thus Montrealers in 1783 had to look to the Quebec Gazette for news. Ominously, on Christmas Day of 1783, the front page of the Quebec Gazette carried an "Address to the Clergy of Canada", imploring them to use their influence over their flocks to persuade them of the benefits of smallpox inoculation. This took plenty of persuading, even though Queen Charlotte and King George III had set an example in having the Prince of Wales and Prince Frederick inoculated by the then rather crude methods. This was in the days before Jenner and being inoculated was an unpleasant business. The doctor used a lancet to make two small openings into the skin of both arms and then ran through the openings a thread that had been exposed directly to a smallpox sore. The editor of the Quebec Gazette might thunder that such inoculations reduced the risk of smallpox from four in ten to four in a hundred, but still the general populace held back and the barracks were crowded with women and children sick of the pox.

More pleasant was the announcement by furrier Lyon Jonas of St. Paul's Street that he had a new and complete assortment of ground squirrel muffs and tippetts. For those who may be unfamiliar with tippetts, it was a lady's cape that covered the shoulders down to meet the muff. Jonas also invited ladies to inspect his ermine cloak linings and offered "Gentlemen's Caps and Gloves lined with furr, very useful for travelling" on winter days. This news appealed to the affluent. The not-so-affluent, including those Loyalists still dependent on the Bounty of the Crown, were more interested in the monthly announcements of the Montreal magistrates concerning the regulated price of bread. No matter how freely trade flowed in other commodities, the price of the staff of life was not allowed to fluctuate in the open market. At Christmas in 1783 the magistrates had set the price of a four pound loaf of white bread at 10 ½ pence; the brown loaf was slightly less. This was a fairly stiff price for the most essential of foods.

With all these disbanded soldiers - American, British and German - roaming the Montreal streets without work, it is not surprising that social tensions erupted. Magistrates took steps to curb what they noted as increasing riots and robberies in the city. The city's one small jail was not only crowded; it was in "a ruinous condition, a nuisance to the public and dangerous to the health and lives of persons confined therein, (having) but three small compartments in which one put prisoners of both sexes... whether for debt, breaches of the peace, or the most flagrant crimes". Cries were soon heard for a bigger jail. Like modern-day administrators, city fathers plunged into a gigantic lottery to solve the problem. 3,000 tickets at 45 shillings each were to be raffled off for some 4,000 prizes in a scheme designed to produce 30,000 pounds for a new jail. A bigger and better jail could solve the problems of thieves and rioters, once caught. But city magistrates had the job of catching them as well as trying to prevent such disorders and crimes. The Indians in barracks at Lachine, for instance, complained that their canoes, paddles and other equipment were being plundered to such an extent that military authorities decided to bring the equipment to the Citadel within the walls of the city for safe-keeping. But even within the city, robberies continued.

Magistrates James McGill and Seigneur de Longueuil sought the help of the military commandant in what must have been one of the first calls for military aid to the civil authority in Montreal. A military patrol of a corporal and six soldiers was ordered to accompany a number of Montrealers each night in patrolling the streets. The patrols were to "take up all soldiers found out of the barracks after hours and to apprehend any class of people who were suspected... of being out on illegal purposes".

This month-long night patrol put an end to the outbreaks which the commandant claimed were "solely the work of the disbanded German troops", a somewhat surprising development since there had never been a single incident of bad behavior among the German troops throughout their long stay in the province.

That the city's newer Loyalist inhabitants experienced some ill-will is indicated by one of the rare reports of hostility towards them. Two French magistrates, Colonels Neveu Sylvestre and St. George Dupre lodged a complaint against a man named Duchene. Duchene had erected a wooden battery in front of his door on which he had mounted a swivel and a cannon. Near it he placed a gallows, presumably to mock the Loyalists. The magistrates asked the commandant to send a file of soldiers to Duchene's house to dismantle the offensive construction.

Montreal in 1783 was like today's city - a community of many peoples: Indians, Americans, French, Germans, Jews, Irish, British, Blacks and others. Its people jostled for place and position, sometimes sharing, sometimes openly hostile to one another. Town fathers took to lotteries for revenue-raising purposes; the military unwillingly took to aiding local magistrates in keeping the peace and trying to stem the crime wave.

Unlike today, Montreal in 1783 did not enjoy the pleasant custom of the lighted Christmas tree so familiar to us today. In England, Queen Charlotte was just introducing this German custom into court life, but it did not become generally popular there until the early nineteenth century. The first Quebec resident to institute this custom was the commander of the German troops, Baron Fr. Von Riedesel. Indeed, the American Loyalists in Montreal were more apt to share the Puritan attitude of the early American colonists who regarded Christmas feasting and holidays as "smacking too much of Popery".

In fact, Christmas Eve in 1783 in Montreal was very much like any other night and this explains why the military commandant found nothing extraordinary about bringing such unpleasant news to the officers and men of the King's Royal Regiment of New York on that particular night, though he softened the blow by informing them and their families that though regimental pay was cut off, they could enjoy free quarters and rations for the rest of the long winter. Nor indeed did the men find the timing inappropriate. They made not a single murmur or demand upon their officers, but took the news quietly and calmly. When the river broke in the spring, most of them, along with the disbanded British and German soldiers and other Loyalist families, moved off for the upper Saint Lawrence where they laid the foundation for the great province of Ontario.