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Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS

IdeaBank#34

ABOUT NISSE AND OTHER YULE MATTERS

1988

About Nisser—and Other Yule Matters

SCRIPT:

Sally: I'm certainly looking forward to celebrating Christmas with you. I don't doubt you observe all the time-honored customs. I'm already aware of the Christmas preparations. Goodness, I never saw such a flurry of cleaning and baking!

Kirsti: Well, of course. Lussi (Loo-see) would punish us, if the place wasn't all ready before Christmas Eve.

Tom: Lucy? I thought that was a Swedish idea. She goes around with candles on her head, I understand, on Christmas morning taking coffee to everyone in bed. How come she's so grim in Norway?

Student: No—not Saint Lucia—I think. We spell the name L-u-s-s-i. She probably dates back to pagan times.

Sally: How does she punish you?

Olav: Probably an extra hard bout of rheumatism.

Student: Or some other illness in the family. That would perhaps follow, if people weren't properly clean—maybe that's the source of the idea.

Sally: Well, there can't be a corner in this house that isn't thoroughly scrubbed already. Lussi won't find anything to do here.

Kirsti: In the old days, when everyone lived in log houses and heated with an open fire, the walls would be black with soot, and you couldn't expect the housewife to get that all off. Instead she'd decorate with chalk patterns from waist-level to as high as she could reach.

Olav: If the local museum is open next week, you might see some examples of that. The curator tries to make everything as authentic as possible.

Tom: I'm glad you can still get sheaves of wheat to hang out for the birds. And what about the saucer of pudding for the julenisse (yool-un-niss-eh)? Do you still do that?

Olav: Oh sure, the old fellow mustn't be cheated out of his Christmas-time

snack.

Sally: Just what is the julenisse anyway? He looks a bit like Santa Claus in the pictures I've seen—but so small, and only his cap is red. The rest of his clothes are just grey or brown, apparently. (could have nisse doll on table to pick up)

Student: Not Santa Claus—though Santa may have borrowed our nisse's red stocking cap, actually. But our julenisse is surely much older than Christian times in this country—maybe four or five hundred years older.

Sally: But who is he, then?

Olav: I suppose he's the rudkallen (rood-kahl-en)—the fellow that first cleared the farm. The haugbonde (howg-boon-uh) who lies buried in the mound up in the orchard.

Tom: What? Is the original pioneer still there, do you think?

Student: Sure—I don't believe we've ever had an archaeologist poking around this farm. During the German occupation in the 1940s some of the trees on the haug (howg) got cut down. I don't think the Germans did anything that made people around here angrier. But the haug itself wasn't disturbed.

Olav: So I suppose the old man still sleeps there, as he has from the beginning.

Tom: How long? When do they think the farm was started?

Olav: Oh—some time between 1200 and 1460, probably. We don't think this valley was much settled before 1200. The actual farm records don't go back before the Great Plague years, about 1460 in this area, however. Nearly everyone died of that plague.

Kirsti: Most people think of the julenisse as a sort of barn-fairy. If he is really the haugbonde, he must wake up on Christmas Eve for refreshments, I guess.

Sally: Come now, you don't really believe in him, do you?

Olav: Oh—well—the Christmas Eve pudding's usually eaten up. I haven't actually seen our julenisse—at least, not since I was a boy. We don't use

horses on this farm now, you know—we have a tractor. But—well, there are other jobs for the nisse to take care of—see that the cows are all right and the barn doesn't burn down, for instance. I wouldn't risk omitting his Christmas pudding. My father used to take beer out and pour it on the mound, Christmas Eve, and smear butter on some of the trees there. I've never done that, and no harm has come.

Student: (laughing) No, of course no grown-up really thinks the julenisse eats up the pudding—it's probably the barn cat! But none of us would like to break the old tradition. It's a way of honoring our forebears, partly—as well as a fun thing for children.

Tom: What other Christmas traditions are we to expect? I understand you open the presents on Christmas Eve, instead of Christmas Day.

Kirsti: Yes, Christmas Day is for going to church and being quietly at home, resting up from the Christmas Eve festivities and enjoying the family. There may be a few callers. Since Christmas is in the middle of the week this year, some people have to go to work again on Second Christmas Day, and aren't free to make their visits then. Out here in the country, though, we call on our friends on Second, Third and Fourth Christmas Day—I expect people for dinner or coffee or supper any of those days! Then some relatives who live farther away may be here on Second and Third New Year's Day.

Sally: Do you have special Christmas food? Aside from julebrod (yoo-luh-bruh) and all the marvelous cookies, I mean?

Olav: You may have realized that the slaughter-master is busy in November, so there's fresh pork, head-cheese and all that. But out here nearer the coast, the big Christmas Eve dish is boiled cod—the biggest one we can get.

Tom: Really—a codfish?

Olav: You'd better believe it. You'll smell it boiling from before we go to the children's service at the church in mid-afternoon, right on until supper at about 10. I hope you appreciate the head of a cod, Tom—as our chief guest, you'll be awarded this prize tidbit.

Tom: I'll do my duty, you can depend on it. Maybe I can be excused from lutefisk (loo-tuh-fisk), however. And I'm working up a good toast to our host and hostess, since I'm the one who has to make the speech. Sally

and I have been practicing saying Skoal, privately!

Kirsti: Oh—one thing we'd better warn your children about, so they won't be frightened. Any evening from Second Christmas Day on through Fourth New Years Day, we're apt to be visited by julebukker (yoo-luh-book er).

Sally: What on earth is a julebukk? (yoo-luh-book)

Olav: Actually, some of the young people from the neighborhood, dressed up in masks and old clothes, come a-begging. Bukk means goat, you know. They used to come riding a broomstick, with an elaborately carved goat's head at the end of it—the person would be hidden with a blanket. The goat's mouth could open and shut, and I suppose there was some kind of bowl inside to catch the money or the goodies—whatever—that the person being visited is expected to give. Nowadays, the goat's head is usually forgotten, and present-day julebukker eat and drink what they're given on the spot. Instead of a broomstick, they often go around on kick-sleds, sometimes two or three on one sled, kicking in rhythm.

Student: Rhythm, and sharing snow-transport, are old skills here. Our Saint Olav, back in the 11th century, is supposed to have escaped his enemies because a friend who had a pair of skis took him aboard, and they skied off together.

Kirsti: Last year, a couple of julebukker came to our house wearing stockings over their heads—really quite fearsome! I had to laugh, though—they couldn't manage the food, could they? Had to carry it away to consume privately—and lost out on the usual glogg. Bet they'll have a different idea, this year.

Student: Thinking about the julebukk and the julenisse, there's another old superstition you may not hear about now, but I think it's very interesting—the oskoreia (aus-kuh-ry-a). People used to believe that the dead returned on Christmas night—sometimes as many as 30 riders around the farmyard!

Kirsti: Sometimes the farm family would leave the house to the ghost-riders that night, with food on the table—thinking of them as ancestors and friends.

Student: But in other places, they were thought of as people who couldn't rest quietly and were dangerous—might steal members of the family, or ride your horses to death, or at least drink up all your ale and leave just water in the kegs. If an oskorei visited your farm, there was apt to be a murder,

or at least a bad fire, afterward. Stables and cellars were protected with steel and crosses, against such visitors!

Olav: No doubt the idea came partly because of the darkness at Christmastime which is pretty dark, as you can see! It was leftover from pagan times.

Kirsti: I think it also had to do with the wild drinking parties which often took place at Christmas time!

Sally: Well, with all the nonsense, and the remnants of old superstitions, I'm glad church and the lovely carols about Christ child aren't forgotten. And candles and the Christmas tree, and dancing around the tree. We share many of the same things, and when the day comes, I don't suppose it will seem so very strange to us. You apparently use more candles than we do, and that must be lovely. (gestures toward candles on table or elsewhere)

Olav: Yes—candles. I suppose that's also because of the very long nights at this time of year. During the war, when we could hardly get food enough, let alone Christmas decorations, many people in Denmark sent us candles for Christmas—we'll always remember.

Sally: It's the small gestures of love and thoughtfulness that really make Christmas, isn't it? Christmas everywhere is threatened with commercialism, but—you can't buy love and thoughtfulness, and they are all that count.

Tom: And love, thoughtfulness, and hospitality have to extend beyond our immediate homes at Christmas, don't they? Mary and Joseph were poor folks, after all, and Jesus' first cradle was a real manger, in a borrowed stable. Christmas is first and foremost for remembering them.

All: God jul! (gooh-yool)