In the Mississippi River parishes of St. James and St. John the Baptist, bonfires have been lit on the levee since the mid-1800s. According to Marcia Gaudet's Tales from the Levee, the bonfires in Louisiana originated with the Marist priests at Jefferson College in Convent. "These French priests began building and lighting bonfires on the batture on New Years Eve, a tradition they had known in France. Years later, the tradition was moved to Christmas Eve and the fires were built on the levee." The fires were constructed as a tall four-sided pyre with timbers laid log-cabin style and fueled by any kind of trash which was stacked in the middle. Today, the building of fires is elaborate and very competitive. Teams of young men organize themselves year after year to build the biggest and most unique fire. The structures range from life-sized, fully equipped oil rigs to forts. Competition between the groups is so strong that often the teams post 24-hour guard during the week of construction so to guard against the possibility of arson or sabotage. To see the bonfires on the levee, drive along the Mississippi River levee south of Baton Rouge after dark on Christmas Eve.

Sparkle of Louisiana Christmas traditions

Le Réveillon, or the awakening (the morning feast following Midnight Mass on Christmas or New Year's Eve) is an age-old custom inherited by the Louisiana Creoles from their European ancestors and adopted by the Germans who settled in the River parishes of Louisiana. Réveillon was a time of family reunion and thanksgiving, which began early in the evening with family members converging on households for hours of conversation. In the French Quarter of New Orleans when the church bells began to ring at about 11 o'clock, the Creoles and their families strolled to St. Louis Cathedral for Christmas Mass. A man might miss any service during the year, but he would be certain to join his family for Midnight Mass at Christmas.

Christmas Eve was recognized as a day of fasting and abstinence by most Catholics. By the end of Midnight Mass the Creoles were hungry and ready to celebrate with a Réveillon feast. Family members returning from church were greeted with an elaborate meal of daube glacé, chicken and oyster gumbo, salmis or game pies, egg dishes, sweetbreads, soups and soufflés, grillades, grits, hominy, homemade breads, crystallized fruits, fruitcake and lavish desserts, wine, brandy, eggnog and New Orleans coffee. The Creole table emulated what might have been found on the tables of France during that same hour.

In rural South Louisiana, Le Réveillon was celebrated though in admittedly more humble circumstances. People gathered at the house of the family matriarch or patriarch to visit, then to walk to Midnight Mass. Often, the trip was lighted by bonfires along the levee, and a hearty breakfast always followed. It is actually the bonfire tradition that has stood the test of time. St. James Parish, where I grew up, was settled in the 1700s by French and German settlers from the Old World. It seems that the bonfire tradition was inherited from these generations past. As necessity is so often the mother of invention, many surmise that because there were no churches on the east bank of the Mississippi River at that time, those living there had to cross the river to attend Mass. So, bonfires were lit on the west bank to guide their skiffs safely across the muddy waters.

Today, it is believed that the bonfires light the way for Papa Noel and his team of swamp gators. Bonfire festivities are accompanied with a celebration of food. Most commonly served are steaming bowls of Chicken and Andouille Gumbo served over rice. Faith, family and food – then, as now – is a mainstay of Louisiana life.