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*Notes from Nancy Arthur*

Christmas during the Civil War

Imagine a war going on in or near your town, or most of the men & boys from your family and area gone off hundreds of miles away during the Christmas season. We certainly have family & friends away, serving our country now but think of a small town, having most of the male citizens gone.

Money was scarce, supplies in the South were, as well, and some who had perished had left a vacant spot in their place.

Some celebratory customs today continue from the 1860’s. Charles Dickens wrote a Christmas Carol in 1843. Carols were sung, many familiar still today – It Came Upon A Midnight Clear, We Three Kings, Deck The Halls, Jingle Bells, Up On The Housetop – all were favorites, then, as well.

Trees were decorated with candles, small cakes, ribbon and oranges. A soldier from the 5th New Jersey wrote about a small tree in front of their tent that was decorated with hardtack and pork, whatever was available, I guess.

Someone from the 17th Maine wrote home on Christmas Eve that “sundry boxes and mysterious parcels” were waiting for them next morning. Did they have a hard time getting to sleep that night, in anticipation of the next morning? This would certainly have been a reminder of their living conditions, vs. what home was like.

The Lincoln’s visited the wounded in military hospitals on Christmas Day, but December 25th wasn’t declared an official holiday until 1870, during the Grant administration.

Probably the largest gift given was presented on December 22, 1864, when General Sherman marched on Savannah and sent President Lincoln the city as a gift.

Confederate states still celebrated but one state – Massachusetts – put forth a ban on the celebration because it was too expensive, and you could be fined for celebrating. What would be thought about the prices today?

*Sorties from Bill Teegarden*

How the Civil War changed Christmas

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Prior to the Civil War, the custom of celebrating Christmas was what we today might consider austere. In rural communities in the North and the South, Christmas Day brought small relief from the necessary duties of farming and providing for one’s family. There would perhaps be a small Christmas tree to sit on a table decorated with ribbons, stringed popcorn and maybe a few candles. Gifts for the family consisted of practical items: sewing needles for the mother, newly knitted socks for the father, a doll or ribbons for a little girl, and a new pocketknife for a teenage boy. Everyone might receive a rare treat of an orange if the local general store had some available. Some families would gather to sing Christmas carols and hymns and perhaps a reading of Clement Clark Moore’s 1822 poem, “A Visit from Saint Nicholas.” Families would also attend Christmas Eve or Christmas Day worship services at their local church.

In larger towns and cities, Christmas in the mid-19th century would see people shop for gifts in bookstores, toy stores and jewelry stores. Gifts were not mass-produced then; many were custom-made for the recipient. A wider variety of food was also available in towns. One might purchase baked goods, a goose or a turkey for the Christmas table, or even some wine. Pre-Civil War Christmas customs in the United States differed significantly from today’s secular celebrations.

On Dec. 20, 1860, just a few days before Christmas, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Within five weeks, six more southern states seceded. A mood of mixed emotions no doubt covered both North and South on Christmas 1860. Was war certain? Would there be a reconciliation? Could peace be maintained in such a deeply divided nation?

During 1861, as the war was underway, most northerners felt the conflict would be short-lived. The Battle of First Bull Run (a.k.a. First Manassas by Confederate forces) was fought in July 1861 and changed northern minds. What many thought would be an easy Union victory ended with 4,700 casualties. As time went on that year, the number of dead and wounded mounted, and by Christmas, soldiers were missing their homes and families, and families were mourning the loss of young lives to battle and disease. Most in the North felt that it should not be like this. The rebels should have been easily defeated by Christmas. But it was not so. Among the soldiers, the sense of adventure melted into a sense of loss.

By Feb. 1862, with the Battle of Fort Donelson resulting in over 17,000 casualties, this sense of loss grew on both sides. Then, in April, the horrendous Battle of Shiloh saw the Union suffer 13,000 losses and the Confederacy 10,600. Throughout 1862, casualties mounted into the tens of thousands. By Christmas, joy in the world and peace on earth were only distant memories in American homes.

The following year, 1863, brought only more despair, with death tolls rising from combat and diseases running rampant through the camps of both armies and countless hideously wounded soldiers suffering and trying to make sense of their broken lives. Then, as if things couldn’t possibly get worse, the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1963 set new records for losses with 23,000 Union and 28,000 Confederate casualties. Sadly, the war-weary nation was mired in despair and exhaustion by Christmas. But in November that year, President Lincoln came to Gettysburg to address the people with hope amid desolation.

By Christmas 1864, folks in the northern states were beginning to have a feeling of hope for the war’s end as more military victories were achieved, and the southern soldiers began to want for supplies and grew wearier from exhaustion. However, the war continued into 1865 until the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Court House in April. But as Christmas came that year, the reunited nation was thankful the conflict had ended. However, the lingering aftermath of the war was the reality, especially in the devastated South, which lost not only thousands of farms and towns but also suffered along with the North the loss of hundreds of thousands of young men.

The Civil War would forever change Christmas. It came to be a time of celebrating peace and anticipation of national unity. President U.S. Grant and Congress made Christmas an official federal holiday in 1870 to promote further healing of the nation.

# The holidays at wartime

Kimberly R. Smith, Special to The County

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The holiday season should be one of joyous celebration.  However, there are countries today in the grip of war.  War dramatically changes how the people in these countries view and observe the “normal” holiday traditions.  Our hearts and prayers go out to those in wartorn countries during this holiday season.

As an example of how war changes our normal holiday observances, we can look at the changes that occurred at Christmas during the American Civil War, 1861 to 1865.  War did not cease on Christmas Day.  In addition to troop exercises, there was a blockade runner caught by the Union Navy on on Christmas in 1861; a well-known Christmas Raid in Kentucky by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan; a military execution for desertion that soldiers were forced to witness; the destruction of the Confederate Salt Works at Bear Inlet, North Carolina by Union soldiers in 1863; and numerous other skirmishes.

Christmas dinner also varied greatly.  Some soldiers received no special treats, privileges or gifts at all on Christmas while others were treated to special meals.  One captain from Massachusetts fed his soldiers turkey, oysters, pie and apples.  In an excerpt from the Civil War diary of Harrison H. Robinson, a soldier from Presque Isle, he writes, “December 25, 1862: No work. Breakfast beans, bread and cold potatoes. Dinner sweet potatoes salt beef squash and bread.”

For Southern slaves, the Christmas season had always meant a break from their duties for a day or two, and they celebrated with singing, dancing and possibly a brief reunion with separated family members from other plantations. Before the war they had received gifts from their masters and their semi-annual clothing allotment.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the preeminent poets of his era, wrote a poem on Christmas Day in 1864 after learning that his son, Lt. Charles Appleton Longfellow, had been severely wounded in battle in November during the Nine Run Campaign.  The poem, “Christmas Bells,” later became the lyrics for the Christmas Carol “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.”  The poem was thought to support pacifism.

Gifts were fewer, that was for certain.  For many, there were no gifts at all as Christmas was not officially observed as a holiday in the United States until five years after the end of the Civil War.  Confederate families sometimes used the war as an excuse for the lack of gifts, telling the children that the Yankees had shot Santa.

Many of the carols we sing today were written during the Victorian Era, 1837-1901.  Some popular during the Civil War included “Deck the Halls,” 1862; “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” 1849; “Jingle Bells,” 1857; “O Come All Ye Faithful,” 1843; “Silent Night,” 1816/1818; and “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” 1857.

Prior to the 1860s, the image of Santa had been presented in many different ways — and colors.  German-born American caricaturist and political cartoonist Thomas Nast changed all of that with a series of 33 drawings presented in the illustrated magazine Harper’s Weekly from 1863 to 1886.

Nast, considered to be the “Father of the American cartoon” and referred to as “the most powerful and influential political cartoonist that America has ever known,” was inspired by Clement Clarke Moore’s “Twas the Night Before Christmas.”  With Moore’s imagery in his head, Nast gave us a jolly old elf dressed in red, who rode in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, lived at the North Pole, read children’s letters, kept a naughty-and-nice list, and climbed down chimneys to deliver presents.

President Abraham Lincoln called Nast’s use of Santa Claus “the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had,” according to E.B. Long’s 1971 book, “The Civil War Day by Day:  An Almanac, 1861-1865.”  Another Thomas Nast cartoon from 1863 depicts Santa distributing gifts to Union troops.  He is also well known for creating the images of Uncle Sam, the Republican elephant, the Democrat donkey, and for illustrating Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.

Kimberly R. Smith is secretary/treasurer of the Presque Isle Historical Society.

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# History Book: “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep”

WORLD Radio - History Book: “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s son is wounded during the Civil War 160 years ago

America’s most famous 19th century poet was the prolific writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

He was born into a religious family. In college he became a Unitarian. He had a high view of God and His creation, but he didn’t believe in original sin, the Trinity, or the preexistence of Christ. As a young man he wrote of religion this way:

LONGFELLOW: Would it not be better for mankind if we should consider it as a cheerful and social companion…and not as a stern and chiding taskmaster, to whom we must cling at last through mere despair, because we have nothing else on earth to which we can cling?

But Longefellow would soon learn that in moments of despair, he would need something to cling to. While studying abroad, Longfellow’s first wife died of miscarriage complications. He returned to America a more somber man, and threw himself into his writing.

He started teaching Modern Languages at Harvard University in 1834. His fame grew as a writer. He remarried in 1843 and by all accounts Frances Elizabeth Appleton and Henry Wadswsorth Longfellow had a happy home.

But in 1861, tragedy struck once again. While Frances was sealing an envelope with wax, her dress caught fire. Longfellow ran into the room and tried smothering it with a rug—but it was too little too late. She died of her injuries. Longfellow was severely burned himself in the process. It is one of the reasons he wore a long beard the rest of his life—to hide the physical scars. The inner scars couldn’t be hidden. Six months after the fire, Henry wrote of his anguish to a friend:

LONGFELLOW: I cannot speak of the desolation of this house and the sorrow which overwhelms and crushes me. It seems indeed as if the whole  world were reeling and sinking under my feet.

The nation’s Civil War added to Longfellow’s heartache. He had been engaged in the fight to end slavery since the 1840s. Many of his poems furthered the abolitionist movement and later motivated the Union troops. And while he believed the cause was right, he was despondent over the loss of human life. After news of the Union’s second defeat at Manassas, Longfellow wrote:

LONGFELLOW:  Every shell from the cannon's mouth bursts not only on the battlefield but in far away homes North or South carrying dismay and death.

In 1863, Longfellow was caught off guard when his own son Charles ran off to join the Union Army without his father’s blessing. It was yet one more devastating blow for the famous poet.

On December 1st, 1863, Longfellow is at dinner when a telegram arrives. He reads that his son has been severely wounded. Longfellow immediately leaves for Washington D.C.

After two fitful days of waiting and searching, father and son are eventually reunited. Charles is in critical condition, but stable. Longfellow brings him home. Henry doesn’t write much in his journal for a few months…but as Charles recovers, so too does his father.

Folklore claims that it’s during this Christmas of 1863—as Longfellow still mourns the devastating loss of his second wife—and the near death of his son…that he hears church bells on December 25th and is inspired to sit down and write his poem: “Christmas Bells.” But there is no record of it in his journal. The poem is first published in 1865, and in subsequent publications it bears the authorship date of December 25th, 1864, more than a year after his son’s arrival home. Meaning he writes the poem after months of reflection, not in a moment of sorrowful inspiration.

It’s likely that he heard church bells on Christmas day 1864…and perhaps they brought him back to Christmas bells the year before…or the many painful Christmases before that. But a poem isn’t a photograph or recording of a moment of time. Rather it is a meditation.

I heard the bells on Christmas DayTheir old familiar carols playAnd wild and sweetThe words repeatOf peace on earth good will to men

Bells are a recurring image in Longfellow’s writing. They appear in a handful of his poems over the years. They symbolize the broad declaration of truth.

And thought how as the day had comeThe belfries of all ChristendomHad rolled alongThe unbroken songOf peace on earth good will to men

The church bells are the unifying theme in the poem. The final line of each stanza is more than a refrain…its very repetition mimics the pealing of bells.

Till ringing singing on its wayThe world revolved from night to dayA voice a chimeA chant sublimeOf peace on earth good will to men

But in Longfellow’s day, the hope of peace is in danger of being drowned out by devastating war between the states. It is here that he draws upon his earlier journal entry about the battle of Manassas.

Then from each black accursed mouthThe cannon thundered in the SouthAnd with the soundThe carols drownedOf peace on earth good will to men

It was as if an earthquake rentThe hearth stones of a continentAnd made forlornThe households bornOf peace on earth good will to men

The second to last stanza is the most personal of the poem. Longfellow meditates on the condition of his own soul while speaking for the nation:

And in despair I bowed my headThere is no peace on earth I saidFor hate is strongAnd mocks the songOf peace on earth good will to men

But then the poet metaphorically hears the bells over the tumult of war. And each line of the final stanza seems to put into words what the bells ring out…not just at Christmas, but all year round.

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep  
God is not dead nor doth he sleep  
The Wrong shall fail  
The Right prevail  
With peace on earth good will to men*

19th century Baptist Theologian Augustus Hopkins Strong is one of many Christians over the generations to appreciate Longfellow’s writing…yet he points out that Longfellow fundamentally misunderstood the Prince of Peace. [Strong writes](https://ia803406.us.archive.org/13/items/americanpoetsthe0000stro/americanpoetsthe0000stro.pdf) that Longfellow’s “Jesus is a model of virtue…but he is not what the New Testament represents him to be—Immanuel, God with us, in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.’

And it is only after the world understands that, will wrong fail, and right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.

Merry Christmas from the Civil War Round Table of the Mid-Ohio Valley…………….