



Christmas was well-established during Civil War

BY JIM BARNARD

ERIE COUNTY CIVIL WAR 150 COMMITTEE

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President Lincoln received a very important gift on Christmas Eve in 1864. It was a telegram from General William Tecumseh Sherman, which stated: “To his Excellency President Lincoln, Washington, D.C. I beg to present you as a Christmas-gift the city of Savannah, with one hundred and fifty heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, also about twenty five thousand bales of cotton. W.T. Sherman, Major-General.”

The president responded two days later: “My Dear General Sherman, Many, many thanks for the capture of Savannah. But what next? I supposed it will be safe if I leave it to General Grant and yourself to decide.”

Savannah may have been the most important present of the war years, but it was certainly not the only one.

How did people celebrate Christmas 150 years ago? Did they have Christmas trees and household decorations? What did they eat for dinner? And did Santa look then like he does today? Were stockings hung for Santa to fill?

The people who lived then were so attached to Christmas they left written accounts of it. Soldiers often wrote home on Christmas Day to tell their families what happened that day. Many people wrote diaries or journals, or drew pictures. Professional writers contributed stories or poems to newspapers.

Robert Gould Shaw, then a lieutenant in the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry, wrote home in 1861, about guard duty near Frederick, Md. “It is Christmas morning and I hope a happy one and merry one for you all, although it looks so stormy for our poor country, one can hardly be in merry humor” he wrote.

Artists provided articles for engraving. Homer Winslow and Thomas Nast drew much at the time, and Nast even combined his many works into a book for publication.

In 1922, Clement C. Moore wrote “Visit from Saint Nicholas” for his children. In the story, he added the eight reindeer and named them, the fur costume, Santa’s mannerisms and his pipe.

Our conception of Santa comes from a painting by Robert W. Weir showing Santa in front of a fireplace with his stack of toys.

By the time the Civil War arrived, Santa was well-established in both the South and the North. One of the benefits the North had over the South was the publishing industry. The North was rich in all the good things that helped make Christmas a time of feasting and celebration. As the war dragged on, food grew scarce in the South and Christmas grew leaner each year.

In the field, very little was done on Christmas Day. Not because of sentimental or religious reasons, but because major campaigns usually began in the spring and went on until cold weather arrived. Then bad roads and severe weather forced the armies to suspend activities for the winter. One exception was Fredericksburg, which was fought on Dec. 13, 1862, but ended well before Christmas.

From the diary of Private Robert A. Moore, a Confederate soldier: “Tuesday, December 24th, 1861, camp near Swan’s. This is Christmas Eve but seems little like it to me.” “Wednesday, December 25, 1861, camp near Swan’s. This is Christmas and very dull Christmas it has been to me. Had one egg-nog to-night but did not enjoy it much as we had no ladies to share it with us”

Many of the young men in the Civil War came from the country and large families. Almost all were used to living in large houses but were now occupying small temporary shelters. Undoubtedly these reminded them of their own homes left behind.

On Christmas night, after the meals were over, the men would sing loud and clear in the still night.

For that evening, at least, the bugles and the guns were stilled, and the centuries-old message was sent forth: Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth, peace, good will toward men.

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