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SONS OF UNION VETERANS OF THE CIVIL WAR

Christmas During the Civil War Dec 2010

Many of today's American Christmas customs are rooted in the early 19th century. Perhaps ironically, they came to maturity during the Civil War, when violence, chaos, and staggering personal losses seemed likely to drown out the choruses of "Peace on Earth."

Many of the artists of the period, Winslow Homer, Thomas Nast, and Alfred Waud created visual chronicles of the spreading influence of many holiday traditions we enjoy today, including Santa Claus Christmas trees, gift-giving, caroling, holiday feasting, and Christmas cards.

Nast and Homer drew scenes of the wartime practice of sending Christmas boxes filled with homemade clothes and food items to soldiers at the front. The war made an impact on the nation, both North and South, in the ways Christmas was observed.

Christmas boxes like the ones Homer and Nast pictured gave their recipients a much-needed mental and physical boost. When in 1861, for the first *Harper's Weekly* Christmas cover of the war, Homer drew overjoyed soldiers reveling in the contents of Adams Express boxes from home.

The most beloved symbol of the American family Christmas--the decorated Christmas tree--came into its own during the Civil War. Christmas trees had become popular in the decade before the war, and in the early 1860s, many families were beginning to decorate them. Illustrators working for the national weeklies helped popularize the practice by putting decorated table-top Christmas trees in their drawings.

On the home front, the homes were mostly decorated with different kinds of pines, holly, ivy and mistletoe. While there were many families who spent lonely Christmases during the war, they still had a Christmas tree which was the centerpiece for the home. Most trees were small and sat on a table.

The decorations were mostly homemade, such as strings of dried fruit, popcorn, pine cones. Colored paper, silver foil, as well as spun glass were popular choices for making decorations. Santa brought gifts to the children. Those gifts were homemade, such as carved toys, cakes or fruits.

It was only a matter of time before the Christmas tree made its way into military camps. Alfred Bellard of the 5th New Jersey remarked about the arrival of the newly popular Christmas icon to his camp along the lower Potomac River.

"In order to make it look much like Christmas as possible, a small tree was stuck up in front of our tent, decked off with hard tack and pork, in lieu of cakes and oranges, etc".

Christmas carols were sung both at home and in the camps. Can you imagine how homesick the soldiers would become singing these songs. Some of the most popular ones were "Silent Night," "Away in the Manger," "Oh Come All Ye Faithful," and "Deck the Halls".

By 1863, the Union blockade of the Southern coasts had made it nearly impossible for Santa Claus to visit homes in the South; scarcity of goods and the consequent high prices put both store-bought presents and raw materials for homemade gifts out of the financial reach of many Southern consumers. Quite a few mothers explained to their children that even Santa Claus would not be able run the formidable blockade.

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas of Augusta, Georgia, told how a simple act of faith on the part of her children caused her to dig deeper for a holiday offering on Christmas Eve:

"I have written so much that it is now after 9 o'clock and yet I have said nothing of Turner's and Mary Bell's party which we gave them last week in lieu of the Santa Claus presents. Mary Bell has been told that Santa Claus has not been able to run the blockade and has gone to war--Yet at this late hour when I went upstairs Thursday night of the party I found that the trusting faith of childhood they had hung their little socks and stockings in case Santa Claus did come. I had given the subject no thought whatever, but invoking Santa Claus aid I was enabled when their little eyes opened to enjoy their pleasure to find cake and money in their socks."

Santa Claus apparently had a much easier time visiting homes in the North than those in the South that Christmas. According to a letter Sarah Thetford sent to her brother George, *"Santa arrived in here in Michigan dressed in a buffalo coat with presents fastened to his coat-tail...and a corn-popper on his back."* She continued that she had *"often heard Santa Claus described, but never before saw the old fellow in person."*

Sometimes Santa Claus worked behind the scenes of wartime savagery to bring a bit of Christmas cheer to those who otherwise had little reason to celebrate. Following General William T. Sherman's capture of Savannah, Georgia, and presentation of it as a Christmas gift to Lincoln in 1864, about 90 Michigan men and their captain in turn gave a token of charity to Southern civilians living outside the city. Christmas Day, the soldiers loaded several wagons full of food and other supplies and distributed the items about the ravaged Georgia countryside. The destitute Southerners thanked the jolly Union Santa Clauses as the wagons pulled away under the power of mules that had tree-branch "antlers" strapped to their heads to turn them into makeshift reindeer.

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