

A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS

What was Christmas like at the time of the Civil War? Did the Victorians have their hearts filled with Joy with all the decorations, lights and celebrations as we do today? Some research was in order.

For the Soldier both North and South, his thoughts would be on family and friends at home. In camp and at the front, his mind and conversation was filled with memories of Holiday's past with loved ones. This would include the celebrations and the decorations. I'm sure they still had the active duties of soldiering like drill and guard duty, but research also shows that they also played "Rounders" (baseball) and had special meals as the Commissary permitted and supplied. The First Lady Mrs. Lincoln even raised funds plus donated food and alcohol from her personal stores at the White House for use in the hospitals in Washington City for the wounded soldiers "to brighten their day". This was especially true in December 1862 at the time of the Battle of Fredricksburg. She arranged for Christmas dinners of duck, turkey, chickens, ham and fresh apples to be delivered on Christmas Day and even visited the hospitals to ensure that the unscrupulous Hospital Stewards and surgeons did not get the best of the goodies.

O Christmas Tree

On the home front, would there have been a Christmas Tree? Chances are the answer would be yes. The first Christmas Tree in America is recorded as being erected in Cleveland Ohio in 1851. The decorations for the tree would have been homemade and very simple. Popcorn balls and strings of popcorn as well as dried fruits and nuts, perhaps mixed with wax, paper and spun glass ornaments are some examples of what would have been used. Also some colored ribbon and candles would have been used to help decorate the tree. Ornaments might be shaped like angels, doll faces, the Christ Child and animals. All would have been handmade. The tree would sit on a tabletop with unwrapped presents placed under them. Keep in mind that the candles on the tree would only be lit once (and then only for a few minutes due to fire hazard). A bucket of water would be kept close by and one of the children would be responsible for watching for fire. In addition to the tree, the entire house would be decorated with greenery such as fir, pine, holly, ivy and mistletoe. No house was considered festive without the fragrance of greenery!!

"Here We Come A Caroling"

Yes, Christmas Carols would have been sung at home and in camp. Songs such as Silent Night, Oh Come All Ye Faithful, Hark The Herald Angels Sing, and Deck the Halls were very popular. Other songs such as It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, O Little Town of Bethlehem, Away in a Manger, I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day, We Three Kings, and Up on the Housetop were all written in the 1850's. I can almost hear Soldier voices both North and South singing these songs, praising the Saviors birth and longing for home and family. Perhaps for one brief moment for them there was "Peace on Earth Goodwill toward Men" as fighting would cease for Christmas. As they sang and celebrated the Savior's birth, perhaps they longed for a new invention (1844) the Christmas card from loved ones at home.

So as the Christmas Season comes each year, may we pause for a moment and reflect on how our ancestors would have celebrated. For more information, please refer to the book "We Were Marching on Christmas Day" by Kevin Rawlins. What a wonderful source of information to enlighten on traditions at the time of the Civil War.

A Christmas wish to you and yours,

May His JOY, His PEACE and His LOVE be with you and all you hold dear.

Joanne Shelby

Co. A 9th Pa.

"Mrs. Abraham Lincoln"