

Tracking down Christmas past, back to 1800s

By David M. Maxfield
Smithsonian News Service

Christmas, you may be surprised to learn, was a work or school day for many Americans until the mid-1800s.

The traditional American Christmas, in fact, is not so very old at all. Gift-giving, card-sending, tree-trimming and other present-day customs did not become widely popular until the final decades of the 19th century, arriving then as a package of Victorian style and business zeal.

For many years, Thanksgiving actually was far more special than Christmas in New England. In the South, firecrackers were sent off Christmas morning; colored eggs decorated evergreens in Dutch settlements along the Hudson River, and well into the 1800s, Santa Claus was portrayed as quite a small, elfish figure sometimes capped off with a feather.

"Technological developments, advances in transportation, printing and mail services probably were responsible for the enormous change and popularization of Christmas day in the Victorian period," according to Shirley Cherkasky, a sociologist responsible for holiday research at the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Performing Arts.

"Certainly, the publication of Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' with its themes of charity and good-will, affected the idea of how people felt Christmas should be observed," she adds.

Early in the country's history, the Puritan settlers believed Christmas should not be observed at all, and in 1659 the celebration was outlawed in Massachusetts by the decree: "Whoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas and the like...shall pay for each offense five shillings to the country."

The Puritans associated Christmas with the Church of England, a painful reminder of their struggle for religious freedom. The December 25 holiday, the strongly felt, was a human invention, a fabrication: Christ's birthdate was unknown, and therefore, the day should never have been ordained by the Church. The Puritans also didn't care much for the occasion, thinking it too closely linked to the spirited pagan celebration of the winter solstice.

But in New York, Pennsylvania and the southern colonies, Christmas was another matter altogether. The Anglicans, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholics in these regions celebrated with music, dancing, feasts and family gatherings. A French traveler, visiting the home of a Virginian in the 1680s, reported: "There was a great deal of carousing. He had sent for three fiddlers, a jester, a tightrope dancer, an acrobat who tumbled...they gave us all the entertainment one could wish for."

"Today, if you're talking about getting back to a more religious holiday, you might remember that Christmas used to be pretty wild," Cherkasky notes. So wild that one early custom call mummung-knocking on doors, ringing bells, rattling cans and shooting off firearms—got completely out of hand in Baltimore late in the 1800s, falling into decline when quieter residents complained.

After years of struggle, the Massachusetts Puritans in 1681 repealed their anti-holiday decree, apparently won over by two reasons: the seasonal joy they could see their neighbors experiencing, plus the protection the U.S. Constitution gave to the separation of church and

state. The Puritans, according to social historian James H. Barnett, were less inclined to oppose the secular celebration when it was no longer a symbol of political and religious dominance of the Church of England.

But some in the colony still were not reconciled to the decision. Complained one judge Sewell: "I believe that the body of the people profane it; and blessed be God, no authority yet to compel them to keep it." In 1856, though, Massachusetts joined the growing list of states giving legal recognition to Christmas Day—the first being Alabama 20 years earlier.

By the mid-1800s, Christmas spirit was on the upswing throughout the country. Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," published in 1843, helped bridge local and regional differences in holiday customs. Its themes of kindness and generosity, according to Cherkasky, crossed many cultural and regional boundaries, thereby helping to universalize the Christmas celebration.

In 1868, Dickens gave readings of the tale in the United States and, after one appearance, he wrote: "They took it so tremendously last night that I was stopped every 5 minutes. One poor young girl burst into a passion of grief about Tiny Tim and had to be taken out."

As it did in other areas of American life, the Industrial Revolution began to influence the way Christmas was observed. Christmas cards, for example, could be produced and mailed inexpensively, gaining wide popularity by 1875. And for better or worse, the first holiday advertising appeared in the 1830's.

But it was not until late in the century, when the business and pleasure of gift-giving began in earnest, that elaborate Christmas celebrations became an annual American experience. "Gifts at first were given mainly to children, servants and tradespeople," Cherkasky notes. "It was a time for evening up accounts. But that was all to change."

"The folk-secular aspect of Christmas was taking precedence over its religious one," Barnett says. "This was apparent in the increasing importance of Santa Claus." Thomas Nast's drawing in "Harper's Weekly" portrayed Santa for the first time as a jolly, white-bearded character dressed in fur.

The popularity of the Christmas tree grew right along with the change in social customs and technological progress. After Queen Victoria set up a Yuletide at Windsor Castle, the style was set, reaching the White House in 1865 during Franklin Pierce's presidency.

Thomas Edison's lab came up with a string of tree lights in 1882, 3 years after the incandescent light breakthrough, and immediately this novel idea became the rage among the wealthy. Christmas tree parties to show off the expensive, lighted trees were major social events.

Today, of course, the Christmas season is the sum of many traditions. "We're so encrusted with a whole set of things to do, compared to the time when the season was really quite simple," says Cherkasky.

In "A Book of Christmas," British author William Samson puts it this way: "Christmas from whatever angle you look at it is complex. When the English-speaking countries sit down at lunch-time to a 'traditional Christmas dinner,' they eat Aztec bird beside an Alsatian tree, followed by pudding spiced with subtropical preserves...."



On the subject of busing for academic reasons Ron Hernandez asks, "if you believe in busing for academic reasons, why hasn't it ever been suggested for schools that are predominantly white where kids score low on achievement test? Why is it just reserved for us?"

(Photo: By Richard J. Brown)

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

GIVING OF GIFTS Time for the giving of gifts, by the Salvation Army, to children and wives of prisoners at the Multnomah County Rocky Butte jail has been changed to begin at 1:00 p.m. and to continue until 6:00 p.m. on December 23, according to A/Capt. Harlan R. Nelson, corrections officer at The Salvation Army's Portland Headquartered Cascade division.

ALBINA CHILDREN'S HOLIDAY PARTY The Sixteenth Annual Albina Children's Holiday Party will be held Friday, December 21st at 1:30 p.m. in the Jefferson High School cafeteria. Miss Tan Portland Ophelia Stevens and television personality The Great Cincinatti will be on hand. The kiddies will be treated to cartoons and movies and as a special treat the 4-H Chorale Group, led by Bro. Ira Mumford will perform Holiday music—and best of all, lots of Good Cheer. The party is sponsored by the Jimmy Bang—Bang Walker Youth Foundation and will be Marshalled by the Jefferson Dad's Club and the Portland Rain Makers. Free for all children of the Portland Area Community. Santa Clause will make his appearance at 2:00 p.m.

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH invites the community to a Christmas Eve Service of candlelight and carols at 7:00 p.m. on December 24th. This year's service, designed especially for the very young, will feature music by the Westminster Children's Choir, by the Bell Choir, and by the 50-voice Chancel Choir. The church is located at Northeast 17th and Schuyler Streets in Portland.

PERGOLES'S "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST" will be the featured work of the Westminster Presbyterian Church Chancel Choir on Sunday, December 23 at 10 a.m. The 50-voice choir, led by Director Janet M. Howland, will be accompanied by a brass ensemble. Dr. Terry Swiegood, senior minister, will speak on the subject, "Steer By the Bethlehem Star". The church is located at Northeast 17th and Schuyler Streets in Portland.

PRINT, DRAWING AND PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY OPENS AT MUSEUM The Portland Art Museum announces that its new Print, Drawing and Photography Gallery is now open to the public during regular visiting hours. The newly renovated space, formerly the Rental Sales Gallery, was upgraded from funds granted by the Oregon Community Foundation.

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| | | Friday | |
| | | "The Pastor Speaks" | 7:30pm |
| "Showers of Blessings Broadcast" | 11:30am-12:30pm | | |
| KGAR 1550 | 6:30pm | | |
| YPBC | 8:00pm | 84 NE Killingsworth | |
| Evangelistic Worship | Noon Day Prayer | 281-0499 | |
| Tuesday-Friday | | | |

Good opportunities for Blacks in the Air Guard

By SrA Steve Finegan
Oregon Air National Guard

PORTLAND AIR BASE—Young Blacks, men and women, should take some time and check out the opportunities in the Air Guard, said Senior Master Sergeant John Miller, first sergeant and senior medical technician for the 142nd U.S. Air Force Clinic here.

He should know—Miller is the first Black man to attain the rank of E-9 in the Oregon Air National Guard.

Opportunities in the Guard are just waiting for minority groups, said Miller. "For the past 10 years, the doors have opened for minorities to obtain job training and education in the military. It's a challenge that many young Black kids are taking—but not enough."

More minorities go into the Marine and Army Reserves because they feel the Air Force is mainly White-oriented, said Miller. But the word is getting out, due to the efforts of men like Miller and Captain Mike Jordan of the social actions office. Jordan is a school principal, with access to many Black students.

Miller feels the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP)/Guard camp held each summer is a great way to show minority children at an early age just what the Guard is all about. Said Miller, "The kids are exposed to military personnel for a week, and most love it."

Miller thinks it's only a matter of time before more Blacks start attaining high enlisted rank in the Air Guard. "It's certainly a worthwhile challenge," he said. "The initiative to go forward will get you anywhere."

Miller was born in Oklahoma in 1933. He moved to Vancouver, Wash. in 1943, where he joined the Marine Corps after World War II. He served four years in Hawaii, California, Korea and Japan. He saw action with the First Marine Division during the Korean War.

In 1956 Miller went to work for the Veterans Hospital in Vancouver. In his spare time, Miller teaches Chung Guk, a Korean-style martial art. He and his wife Sandra have nine children.

DO YOU NEED HELP?

Is the DEVIL working against your home, nature, job, church, money, children, sex, neighbor, health, sick, family, loved ones? Are there demons on your body or in your home? Have you been in a fix where you cannot keep or find the RIGHT man or woman? If you need help with any or all of these problems you should call me NOW!! Tomorrow may be too late!! Does your luck pass you by? If so, I have lucky hands to help you be a winner in all GAMES OF CHANCE—Bingo, Reno, Tahoe, Las Vegas, Special, Miami, Fla., etc.

If you are a spiritual seeker who needs help not promises—call me. I am a "God Gifted" man. I can help you in a hurry.

TESTIMONIALS

1) Miss Joyce J.W., Portland, OR., was in a fix where she could not find or keep a good man. I, Rev. Hoskins, removed the fix and the jinx from her. NOW she can draw the man of her desire to her like a magnet.

2) Mr. & Mrs. C.P. of Compton, CA., could not win the BIG one. They called Rev. Hoskins and Rev. sent them for a for-sure win blessing money hand. They went to Las Vegas and their luck kept on coming, winning more than \$16,000.

3) Ms. Barbara T., Inglewood, CA., had a man who left home for another woman. She called Rev. Hoskins with tears in her voice. She wanted him back!! Now he is back and eating out of her hand.

4) Mr. Paul, Los Angeles, CA., was in a fix and rooted by this woman. As a result he lost his nature for other women, but through Rev. Hoskins' work, Paul regained his nature and became luckier than ever with women, money and his business.

5) Mrs. O.I., Long Beach, CA., had demons in her body, and in her home, causing all kinds of bad luck, and unnatural sickness. She called Rev. Hoskins and in 72 hours her home and body were free of unclean spirits.

(The names in the above testimonies have been changed for the protection of the individual.) I guarantee to do what I say I can do. I have a big reputation to protect.

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