

Come early Christmas Days in America

THE Mayflower landed the Pilgrims at Plymouth December 31, 1620, just a few days before Christmas. But Christmas day brought no thought of revelry, gaiety or even observance to the Pilgrim Fathers. As a matter of fact, the very thought of observing the day was regarded as sinful. The first Christmas day found them with no houses built and no shelter from the icy winds, as the day before was Sunday and no hands were allowed to labor or disturb the sanctity of the Sabbath.

The next day, however, (Christmas), the swinging of axes, the felling of trees, the splitting of timbers and the clearing of ground occupied their time entirely. They gave no outward sign that the twenty-fifth of December was to them any more than any other day. They bent themselves sternly to the work before them, though most of their countrymen across the sea were in the midst of transports of hilarious joy.

When the second Christmas came, there had arrived in the meantime another ship, and of this colony William Bradford, the sternest of Puritans, was governor. He formally outlawed Christmas, as the Puritans of England had done when they assumed control of parliament. The enactment of the General Court of Massachusetts ran, "Who is found observing by abstinence from labor, feasting, or in any other way, any such day as Christmas day shall pay for every offense five shillings." More than a century passed before the gradual growth of Episcopal influence in Massachusetts, and its association with official power when the colony fell under the direct control of the crown, brought about some relaxation of the anti-Christmas sentiment of the Puritans. During this time the rule of the "Roundheads" in England had fallen before the Restoration.

In Virginia, or what was then called the Old Dominion, Christmas was venerated. Even in the midst of perils which confronted the pioneers in the days of the settlement of Jamestown, they did not entirely forget the customs to which they had been brought up at home. They were fond of feasting and drinking and dancing although their first Christmas, when the gallant John Smith was a prisoner in the hands of Powhatan, and when the legend of the rescue by the lovely little Pocahontas had its genesis, as well as their second Christmas, when the indomitable captain was leading a band of colonists against her father, were times which drove the little colony to despair. As years went on these Virginia colonists thrived and became a colony of planters and cavaliers and the spirit of Christmas filled cabin and mansion with festal joy.

In the time when George Washington was still known principally as a prosperous planter, the great manor houses along the shores of the James, the

York, the Rappahannock and the Potomac presented at Christmas such status as the hospitable roof trees under which the entire family and their dependents, black and white, were assembled. There was a big roast turkey at the head of the table, the great fireplace blazed with crackling logs, the apartments were decked with evergreens, the long tables were set out with shining silver branches and the darlings thrummed their banjos and sang their jolliest songs. This Virginia Christmas was also characteristic of the celebrations in the Carolinas, Georgia and Maryland. South of these, however, in what is now Louisiana, the festival was French in its traditions.

It is in New York that we catch the first glimpse of Christmas in America as a season of both religious commemoration and domestic joy with all the old English heartiness and a little of the old English grossness. The old Knickerbockers loved ease and contentment, the pleasures of the fireside and the innocent merriment of the children and they ate and drank with the wholesome appetites of strong and cheerful natures. From the Netherlands they brought with them the Christmas of love and sympathy in religion, of comradeship among neighbors and of festivity in the family. In that region of Manhattan Island which now lies between the Battery and Wall street the honest joviality of Christmas in its purely human aspect was unsurpassed anywhere on this side of the Atlantic.

The burgomaster and his associates officially commanded the observance of the day; sometimes all public and private business was laid aside for the rest of the waning year, and in fact all work that was not considered absolutely necessary was temporarily abandoned.

It was in New York, or rather we should say Amsterdam, that Santa Claus made his first American appearance in something like the garb and manner now familiar to all of us. To them Saint Nicholas was a sacred personage with his bundles of cakes and toys, as he passed from door to door and noisily banged down the chimneys of the houses on Hoer street, as Broadway was then called. They pictured him as fat with a Flemish nose, rosy cheeks, frosty beard and holding a long pipe between his laughing rows of teeth.

In those days and long afterwards, the Christmas tree was unknown to most American children. The tree was chiefly German in its origin among us and made its advent largely through the extensive German population which settled in Pennsylvania. It was this German joy over Christmas that gave the continental army during the Revolution one of their earliest opportunities for national inspiration.

In the gloomy days of the close of '76, Washington surmising that the Hessians, who were Germans, of the British army would set up a Christmas carousing in their camp, formed his plans

for the crossing of the ice packed Delaware upon the foreign mercenaries. The victory was complete and overwhelming.

The second Christmas however was the darkest and saddest in American history. This day found Washington at Valley Forge where he had retired after one baffling defeat upon another. On the day before Christmas eve many of his men were sick or poorly clad, in fact, the Tories derided them as "scarecrows" and "ragmuffins." Many were half famished and a bowl of soup was regarded as a luxury. Tents, overcoats and even blankets were few and thousands of the soldiers when they lay down to sleep had nothing between them and the earth but their ragged clothes. During two days before Christmas they were almost wholly without bread or meat and Washington was in fear that the army would desert him or go to pieces in the face of its hardships. Many Americans distrusted Washington's ability and there was a movement on foot to supplant him by General Gates. On the day before Christmas eve General Washington reported that many of his men were confined to hospitals and farm houses for want of shoes and that 2500 men in camp were unfit for duty because they were barefoot and otherwise naked.

Thirteen years afterward witnessed the first Christmas under the new Republic. The first Christmas of the first president of the United States was a season of simple enjoyment amidst a happy population. In the morning the president went to St. Paul's church; in the evening Mrs. Washington held a reception. There was no display of lavish expenditures, nor intemperate gaily in the presidential household, for Washington appreciated the effect of his personal example in such things upon his countrymen and was studious in avoiding ostentation.

Dumb jewels often in their silent kind,
More quick than words do move a woman's mind.
—Shakespeare.



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THE MISTLETOE sprig is a potent mascot, and the hostess who, following a quaint old fancy, presents her guests or callers with a sprig is not only presenting them with good luck and good fortune, but is doing what, of old, the priestly Druids did when they gave the worshippers of the Supreme Being, typified in the form of an oak, a portion of the parasite plant to keep religiously as long as it lasted. The mistletoe sprig was supposed to give power to perceive witches and evil-doers and insured prosperity; to those whom the Druids disliked or wished harm, they refused the mistletoe sprig. No one could poison the holder of a piece of mistletoe, for the sprig would discover poison, no matter how cunningly administered, and save the owner from all harm. To childless folk the mistletoe brought offspring, to the sick, health. In fact, it was the symbol of health, wealth and prosperity; and the house that sports a branch of mistletoe at Christmas will never be unlucky.

It is from the Druids, too, that the custom of decorating our churches and our homes with evergreen comes, for they believed that all the sylvan spirits flocked together on these boughs, there to remain until the warm weather. In the midwinter the Druids send around sprigs of ivy and mistletoe to remind people to decorate their dwellings with evergreens, in order to propitiate the sylvan spirits and secure protection from frosts and wintry blasts.

Holly berries possess and give wonderful power when worn in the shape of a wreath, which must be made in imitation of the sacred crown of thorns and of berries as red as blood, and the wearer must go alone at midnight on Christmas and sit in a church in the dark. Second sight will then come to him, and into the church will file all those of his friends who will die during the coming year. Worn on Christmas eve, the holly wreath will evoke visions of spirit forms coming in the air to sing their Noel songs, and all the bests will be seen to kneel down in worship. If preserved for a year, the crown will give the owner safety from violence. In some parts of England it is believed that unless every bit of holly be removed from the house by twelfth night, some ill luck will come. Since pins can also bring luck, but only one must be offered and eaten in the house. To take two would be decidedly unlucky. The one accepted and eaten will insure to the eater a portion of good luck on a day to come in the ensuing year. To eat two would spoil the luck, and if three be eaten on Christmas in one house ill luck will follow. If the pie's first uncut slice ever made has crusts of this shape, then the luck is better, to represent the manger, strips of pastry used to be laid crosswise over the pie.

The yule cake has the same power as the holly wreath on Christmas night, for if a maiden place a piece of it under her pillow on Christmas night she will dream of her future husband. Also a portion of the cake should be kept for the next year, as it brings luck in the house.

The plum pudding must be kept and

again partaken of New Year's day if one would have a successful year.

The ancient Saxon burnt the yule log as a symbol of the turning of the sun toward spring. They, by the way, considered the mistletoe berries unlucky, and a symbol of their hell—Nifheim, abode of the death goddess.

A brand of the yule log snatched from the fire used to be carefully preserved, kept dry, and used to light the Christmas fire the next year, because it preserved the spirit of the fire during the year and subdued the spirit of the flames. Its powers were best used in the days of the Druids, when the bonfire fires were lighted and the brands secured from the fire to light the fire next year.

Even the moon contributes its share to the Christmas superstitions; for as the legend runs, "if Christmas comes during the waning moon we shall have a good year and the nearer to the full moon the better."

It is surprising how many of the stories of the moon are connected with the Christmas tide. The Frisians say that one Christmas eve an old man, thinking of his next day's dinner, climbed the fence and stole his neighbor's cabbages. Just as he lifted his burden on his back, however, the Christ Child rode by on his white horse carrying gifts for the good children, and spying the thief, said: "Because thou hast stolen on the holy eve, thou shalt stand in the moon and be seen by everyone forever and forever." So, there he is; and on every Christmas eve he is permitted to turn around once.

Russian folk-lore tells us that this man in the moon was one who was seeking the life in which there is no death. At last, after traveling far, he found the longed-for haven, and took up his abode in the moon. After 60 years had passed, Death called for him one Christmas eve and a fierce struggle ensued with the moon, who was victorious; and so the man stayed where he was.

Devonshire, England, noted for its apples, boasts a curious custom. On Christmas eve the farmer and his son stand beneath the oldest and best apple tree, all bearing a jug of cider, and sing a certain folk song. After passing the elder jug around they betake themselves home to a good supper and much merry-making.

The Jamaica negroes collect all bits of odds and ends of finery with which to array themselves on Christmas eve, and choosing a king and queen, follow these leaders about, making as much noise as possible, blowing horns, beating drums and doing mischief generally.

In Holland a pretty custom exists. On the night before Christmas, in commemoration of the star of the east, the young men of the town assemble and carry through the dark streets a large bright star, all the people go out to greet it, and give to the bearers of the "Star of Bethlehem," as it is called, alms for the poor.

The custom of giving gifts at Christmas came not from the presents of gold and silver given to the Christ Child, as many believe, but from an old custom of priests putting on board of all outgoing ships a box of alms. This box was opened at Christmas tide, and masses said for the givers of the alms, and was called a "Christ mass" box, and from this has come our custom of Christmas boxes and gifts.

You no doubt realize it will soon be—

"The night before Christmas, And all through the house"



Everybody will be stirring, in spite of the fact that the poet has said no one moves, not even a mouse. The folks will be stirring around, filling up stockings and socks, and you know the holiday season is never complete unless one gives and receives something really worth while. Volumes of love lyrics and pictures of pretty maidens are all right at times, but for the men

LET US SUGGEST

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