

ISCHUA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CHRISTMAS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

One hundred fifty years ago the United States found itself at war. The North battled the South over issues of states' rights and slavery. The outcome would determine whether we would survive as a Union or forever be divided. The North proved victorious but at a loss of 3% of the population to death. The Civil War raged from 1861 to 1865. The end resulted in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln who had served as President during this period.

Soldiers from both sides suffered from disease, wounds, imprisonment, starvation and incredible cruelty. Christmas time, once a joyous experience was a time of misery. Letters written home and diary entries describe the loneliness and longing of the soldiers. They write of their happy memories of former Christmases. It was at this time that the custom of sending packages to soldiers at the front was born. The fortunate received boxes with new clothing and food for Christmas.

They remembered the wonderful meals at home, but most had to settle for hardtack and salt pork. One lucky regiment had a Captain from Massachusetts who arranged for his men to have turkey, oysters, apples and pie. However, that was the exception.

Men gathered around the campfire and sang seasonal songs such as "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Jingle Bells," "Deck the Halls" and "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." In some regiments singing was forbidden and one group was punished for celebrating Christmas with a round of gunfire. However, they were not celebrating the holiday. It was a volley for the funeral of one of their own.

Many letters were written home, urging families to enjoy the holiday. Families had small trees usually placed on tables and they decorated them with colored paper, strings of dried fruit and popcorn, paper chains, and pine cones. Holly, pines, ivy and mistletoe were hung around the house.

Northern children were told that Santa would come, but the gifts consisted mainly of small carved toys, cakes and fruit. The Southern children were told that Santa was not able to get through the military lines as an explanation for a meager holiday.

In one of the areas of Georgia the Union soldiers gathered goods and donated them to the poverty-stricken southerners in the region at Christmas.

Skirmishes and small battles continued even on Christmas. One year military executions of deserters were scheduled on that day and the soldiers were forced to watch.

In 1861 President Lincoln and his family visited wounded soldiers in hospitals at Christmas. His son was so moved that the next year Tad arranged for small gifts to be given to the soldiers in the hospital from him.

In 1864 the poet Longfellow wrote a pacifist poem entitled "Christmas Bells" on Christmas day when he learned that his son had been severely wounded.

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Following the war, Christmas became a time of joyous celebration and appreciation of family and peace. Christmas customs flourished. Families had wonderful feasts and children again eagerly awaited the arrival of Santa Claus. It became the custom to exchange Christmas cards. People attended church services and enjoyed caroling. This became a time to visit with other family members, friends and neighbors. It is believed that the surviving soldiers who returned home put emphasis on celebrating Christmas as a way of banishing the memories of the wartime Christmases. In 1870 the government recognized Christmas as a legal holiday.

Submitted by: Maggie Fredrickson, Village of Franklinville Historian

Sources for this article were obtained from various internet web sites, as well as diaries and letters written by Civil War soldiers at Christmastime.