

“Christmas is Oh So Changed!”

FAMILIES NORTH AND SOUTH SUFFERED DEATH AND DEPRIVATION DURING THE CIVIL WAR, BUT THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS PROVED TO BE STRONG.



By Gregory LeFever

IT was Christmas Eve, 1863, in a small house in an Illinois village. The girl was 15, her brother 13, living alone with their mother while their father was off to war. They had last seen him when he visited on furlough in July, but their letters to him had gone unanswered since September.

“We had become discouraged and had not made preparations to celebrate, for we felt we could not endure life without some word from our loved one,” the girl recalled fifty years later. “At last, evening came and we gathered for prayer. We knelt and took turns in praying for our loved one, though we were all weeping so hard we could scarce understand one another. At last the prayers were finished and tears dried and we rose to our feet – to see our father rising from his accustomed place near mother. He had stolen in, unobserved, and taken the place he loved so well during our evening worship. He told us he had been severely wounded and had lain in a hospital for three months, and although he had sent us word of his whereabouts, the letters had never reached us.

“Words cannot express our joy and happiness at his return!”

This reminiscence of Mrs. C.A. Slagle was a winner in the “My Best Christmas” contest in the 1913 issue of *The American Magazine*, and it was a happy Christmas story indeed. But in the War Between the States, many families – North and South alike – did not fare so well.

A Confederate soldier, Tally Simpson with the Third South Carolina Volunteer Infantry, wrote from camp in Fredericksburg, Virginia, just ten days after a brutal Confederate victory in which 12,000 northern troops and 6,000 southerners had perished:

“This is Christmas Day. All is quiet and still, and that very stillness recalls some sad and painful thoughts. This day, one year ago, many thousand families – gay and joyous in celebrating Merry Christmas, drinking health to absent members of the family and sending upon wings of love and affection long, deep, and sincere wishes for their safe return – today are clad in the deepest mourning.”

Few families from Maine to Texas did not send a father, a son, or a brother off to war. In all, nearly four million soldiers fought in the war that lasted from 1861 to 1865, and of that total, 620,000 died. It was America’s deadliest war.

Yet, amid all of the Civil War’s blood and hatred, the spirit of Christmas still arose in surprising places.

Previous Page: Artist Thomas Nast is credited with creating the traditional image of Santa Claus, and this is his earliest depiction, from Harper’s Weekly of January 3, 1863. Here Santa sits on his sleigh and hands out presents to Union soldiers and two drummer boys. One soldier’s gift is a pair of socks, which were highly prized among troops on both sides. Santa holds a dancing puppet with the unmistakable likeness of Confederate president Jefferson Davis with a string around his neck.

A Day Changed by War

Americans had only recently begun to celebrate Christmas as a holiday by the time the war began, and it would not become a national holiday until five years after the war ended.

By 1860, families throughout America were enjoying the holiness and festivity of Christmas – thanks mostly to German settlers who provided the tradition of Christmas as a family celebration with presents and even the Christmas tree. People were decorating their homes with boughs of pine, holly, ivy, and mistletoe. They draped Christmas trees with dried fruit and popcorn. At home and in church, voices were lifted to “Silent Night,” “Oh Come All Ye Faithful,” “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” and “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Even the image of Santa Claus as we recognize him today was becoming popular due to the Harper’s Weekly drawings of artist Thomas Nast.

By Christmas of 1861, the contrast with Christmas of years past already was felt throughout the land. “Christmas is oh so changed, so flat!” a girl in Petersburg, Virginia, wrote a mere eight months after the beginning of the war. The editor of the Petersburg Daily Express, a man named A.F. Crutchfield, elaborated: “The prospects are that Santa Clause will not be so generous at Christmas eve as he has been in times past. The ‘little folk’ will receive fewer presents, and probably will eat less confections.”

“Pa Ma, and I sat long into the night talking of those wont to gather with us on this day and of the sad condition of our country and our own home,” Josie Underwood, a 21-year-old woman living with her well-to-do parents on their farm near Bowling Green, Kentucky, wrote in her diary for Christmas of 1861. “We three knelt together whilst Pa prayed earnestly for Peace and for God’s guidance for us all, and I kissed them and left them with my heart almost breaking for their troubles. ‘Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men!’ Alas! How the song of the Angels is mocked by the present condition of the country.”



The famous Harper’s Weekly artist Thomas Nast captured the feelings of the nation with this spread appearing in the December 26, 1863, issue of the magazine. It features the touching homecoming of a soldier on furlough, as well as one of the earliest drawings of Santa Claus with a bag of presents on his back. Other scenes show the family opening gifts and in prayer around their Christmas meal.

As the conflict wore on, year after year, Christmas was marked by more and more deprivation. Southern families called 1862 the “cold-water Christmas” because all grain had been commandeered for the army, leaving nothing to distill into liquor for holiday toasts. Even in the wealthier North, families sacrificed festivities for the war effort, and mourning increased as more fathers and sons were listed among the victims of murderous battles and rampant disease. In the South, the hardship eventually became extreme. Food and clothing grew ever scarcer.

By 1863, children throughout the Confederacy were being told that the Yankee blockade off the southern coast had stopped Santa Claus from delivering presents.

Hopes for Peace on Earth

If families gathering at Christmas were longing and grieving for fathers and sons, the war was even worse on the soldiers themselves, huddled around fires in December’s chilly rains and snows, their ranks steadily thinned by the deaths of comrades.

Corporal J.C. Williams of the 14th Vermont Infantry echoed the thoughts of thousands of other soldiers: *“This is Christmas, and my mind wanders back to that home made lonesome by my absence, while far away from the peace and quietude of civil life to undergo the hardships of the camp and battlefield, I think of the many lives that are endangered, and hope that the time will soon come when peace, with its innumerable blessings, shall once more restore our country to happiness and prosperity.”*

Camped outside of Nashville in 1862, John Chilcote of the 19th Ohio Infantry wrote, *“This is Christmas and what a contrast between our Christmas and those who are home in good, comfortable houses, with plenty to eat and good beds to sleep in, and good nurses when sick. The measles, mumps, chicken pox, small pox and about everything else has broken loose and taken hold of the boys.”*

Nor did military action stop for Christmas, although most of the action tended to be minor. Christmas Day of 1861 saw skirmishes between Union and Confederate troops in Virginia and Maryland, while a year later Confederate General John Hunt Morgan pulled off one of his surprising raids in Kentucky. On Christmas of 1863, skirmishes occurred near Charleston, South Carolina, and on Christmas, 1864, Confederates repelled a fleet of Union gunboats at Fort Fisher in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Yet, many soldiers on both sides often tried to make the best of Christmas. In some camps they designated a Christmas tree and decorated it with strips of salt pork and hardtack biscuits. Some officers scrounged turkeys, oysters, and pies to treat their troops – who also shared occasional boxes of food that had arrived from their families at home – though such celebrations were rare because food was scarce, especially among Confederate soldiers, and some officers banned Christmas celebrations altogether. The contrast between Christmas in wartime and in peacetime was perhaps stated best by Union Lt. Colonel Frederic Cavada, writing from Libby Prison in Richmond in 1863, five months after his capture at the battle of Gettysburg. *“The north wind comes reeling in fitful gushes through the iron bars, and jingles a sleigh bell in the prisoner’s ear, and puffs in his pale face with a breath suggestively odorous of eggnog,”* he

wrote. *“Christmas Day! A day which was made for smiles, not sighs— for laughter, not tears—for the hearth, not prison.”*

And Goodwill to Men

The Christmas spirit is strong. Even in the worst of times, there are people who remember kindness, who make efforts to soften the hardships of others. And a few incidents during the Civil War bear out this truth.

As the holiday neared in 1862, the young students of a woman – who happened to be the wife of a Confederate general – who taught dance in Winchester, Virginia, collected among themselves three dollars to give their teacher a Christmas present. They wanted to give her much-needed sugar, coffee, and tea, but no local merchants could provide these things. Because Union troops occupied Winchester at that time, the girls went to the Union camp but were told the army was prohibited from selling supplies to local people for fear the food might end up with Confederate troops. The girls then told the sentry they were on “important business” and asked to see the officer in charge of the encampment. “You can hardly imagine a more scared set of little girls,” one recalled years later, as they were taken to see the Union colonel. They explained their situation to the colonel, who said he would take care of it and sent the girls on their way.



This drawing from a December 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly shows children in a northern family enjoying new Christmas presents, including dolls, books, a rocking horse and other assorted toys. Emphasizing the war, one boy wears a kepi, haversack and drum while wielding his toy sword.

“That afternoon up came the colonel’s orderly with twenty pounds of sugar and a large packet of coffee and tea – I suppose five times as much as our money would have brought,” the now-grown woman explained. “The colonel had written a nice letter with three one-dollar greenbacks in it, saying that he was glad to contribute to the brave little girls who wished to give a Christmas present to the wife of a Confederate general who had given her time for our amusement.”

One of the most devastating events of the war occurred two years later, in 1864, as Union General William T. Sherman marched his army through Georgia, laying waste to countless farms and seizing thousands of horses, mules, and cattle as he inflicted “scorched earth” tactics from Atlanta to Savannah. But as Christmas approached the spirit of the holiday made itself known. That Christmas Day, a group of nearly 100 Michigan soldiers loaded several wagons with food and supplies, and then strapped “antlers” made from tree branches

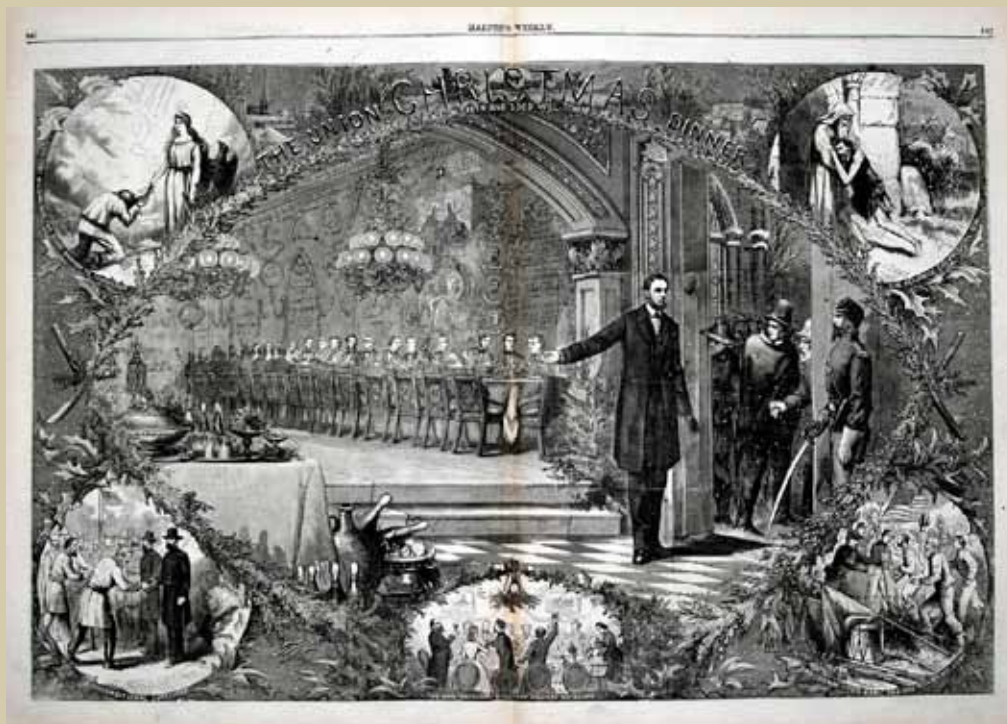
onto their mules, making them into makeshift reindeer. These northern Santa Clauses then drove the wagons – singing carols as they went – to several homes that had been ravaged, distributing the food to the amazed and grateful Georgian families. Although occurring a few days after Christmas in 1862, perhaps one incident above

all speaks to Christmas and the American Civil War. The evening of December 30 was cold and rainy as Union and Confederate troops drew their battle lines near Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the two armies only about 400 yards apart in the darkness. A Union regimental band struck up “Yankee Doodle,” and when it finished, a Confederate band responded with “Dixie.”

“The still winter night carried their strains to a great distance,” recalled Private Samuel Seay of the First Tennessee Infantry. “At every pause on our side, far away could be heard the military bands of the other. Finally one of the bands struck up ‘Home! Sweet Home!’ As if by common consent, all other airs ceased and the bands of both armies, far as the ear could reach, joined in the refrain.”

Soon men’s voices from both armies rose to express in song the homesickness they knew so well:

*To thee, I’ll return overburdened with care,
The heart’s dearest solace will smile on me there.
No more from that cottage again will I roam.
Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.”*



In one of the most moving depictions of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, artist Thomas Nast shows the president welcoming Confederate soldiers to a large Christmas banquet celebrating peace and good will. The theme of this December, 1864, drawing is reconciliation and receiving the South back into the union, even though there were still four more months of war to come. Scenes around the main picture show the prodigal son and Lady Liberty to support the theme.