

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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A Civil War Christmas

The American Civil War, despite its savagery and enormous loss of life, still was the cause for many changes to our nation, which has been largely forgotten in the historical telling.

The celebration of Christmas during wartime is always interesting, and particularly so during horrific encounters between the Union and Confederate forces during this nineteenth century four-year societal carnage.

The thought that first comes to mind is: Christmas is a time of celebration, a reminder of God's intervention in the world of man to bring peace with God through Jesus, to give and receive gifts and cards with family and friends alike, and a time to gather with family around a table loaded with sumptuous quantities of food and conversation. Yet, we're engaged in a war of attrition, killing off our countrymen, and even family members, at a frightening pace. How could Christmas be enjoyed in the midst of this hellish war?

As it turns out, we humans have an amazing adaptability, especially during the most traumatic and stressful of times.

Christmas was a well-established special time of the year in the United States leading up to the start of the Civil War. However, the war itself would cause many to reflect on its continued recognition and enjoyment. Both Northerners and Southerners made the most of this special day throughout the war, even though battles and military maneuvers continued unabated. In 1870, five years after the war ended, then President Ulysses S. Grant made it official that Christmas would henceforth be a national holiday, in part in an attempt to further heal the rift that still festered between North and South.

Ever wonder how the image of a jolly fat man with rosy red cheeks, an expansive girth, and a bright red suit of clothes came about? Once again, the Civil War takes center stage. One Thomas Nast, an editorial cartoonist for Harper's Weekly, was asked by the editor, Fletcher Harper, to make a drawing for the Christmas edition which hit the streets January 3, 1863. Nast had a complete mental block as to how to go about fulfilling his assignment. He spent an evening with his school teacher sister who was visiting him for Christmas, where they reminisced about the Santa character, known as Pelznikel from their native Germany. Later that evening Nast had the inspiration for the cover for the paper. Santa was center stage in the drawing, visiting soldiers in the field, handing them presents. This began the evolution of the Santa character to what we have today.

Tom Nast did something a bit different for the Christmas edition of Harper's Weekly in 1864. The end of the war was coming to a close, with the North victorious after the long and bloody conflict. The title of the article was, "The Union Christmas Dinner." The drawing showed an openhearted President Lincoln

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extending his arms to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee, welcoming them back into the fold of the United States.

Another Civil War addition to Christmas had to do primarily with decorating the Christmas tree. Hanging items on the tree was nothing new, for this had been done for many years. However, due to shortages, and lack of decorative items due to the demands of wartime, creativity took over as men in their camps would hang such items as were available. This even includedhardtack (what sailors called a *ship biscuit*), a tough, durable, saltless biscuit that had a nearly endless shelf life. Often, soldiers would receive trinkets or other items from home which would end up on their unit's Christmas tree. The men were encouraged to add items to the tree that were more colorful, in hopes of brightening the spirits of the men in an otherwise dreary and drab setting.

One soldier wrote his thoughts on Christmas Eve in a lengthy poem, entitled, "Christmas Night of '62". William Gordon McCabe, a Confederate, was in a melancholy mood, clearly wishing for a return to hearth and home. Did he survive the war and return home? I don't know. But you can sense his yearning, as all who wear the uniform of our country so yearn when far away from home during Christmas.

"My thoughts go wandering to and fro,
vibrating 'twixt the Now and Then;
I see the low-browed home again,
the old hall wreathed in mistletoe.
"And fairly from the far-off years
comes borne the laughter faint and low,
the voices of the Long Ago!
My eyes are wet with tender tears.
"I feel again the mother kiss,
I see again the glad surprise
that lighted up the tranquil eyes
and brimmed them o're with tears of bliss.
"As, rushing from the old hall-door,
she fondly clasped her wayward boy –
Her face all radiant with joy
she felt to see him home once more."