

"Old Christmas" and Christmases Past

Both Nature's and the Christian calendar remain influential in daily lives and are often intertwined, as in the early life of tobacco. Usually in January, a seed or plant bed was cleared and prepared. Folk wisdom dictated that, for best results, the tobacco seeds must be sowed "between the Christmases" (December 25-January 6), when they went "to Hell and back." The allusion is to the upheaval when England passed the Calendar Act (1751) that "stole eleven days." Prior to that reform, Christmas was celebrated on January 6 ("Old Christmas") by Gregorian reckoning. Rodanthe, on the "isolated" Outer Banks, continues to do so, claiming that it did not learn of the change until years after the fact!

History is politically incorrect today when we typically refer to the "Holidays," but many remember "Christmases Past" with great pleasure. When "Miss Babe" Kelly of Broadway (NC) saw snow up to grown-ups' knees "upon that sacred day," she "always opined it was God's way of remindin' them to be on their knees in prayer." Once, though "not right on Christmas," the Cape Fear River "froze plumb over. Farmers drove horses and wagons across it. The mules were too smart to go, and the oxen were too heavy. Another time the snow just hung on, deep, deep, deep, for three weeks." The Kelly family didn't get a "cook stove" until Miss Babe was fourteen (c. 1900). At Christmas, she walked six miles to help a neighbor lady, who paid her with a cake. Though she was "not much given to women sorts of things," at 88, she crocheted two hundred pairs of slippers for the poor at Christmas.

Margie Cole Spivey, of Sanford, especially remembered Snow Cream. Her mother scooped a large bowl of snow from the top of the well and mixed it with milk, sugar, and vanilla. Colder than ice cream, it was always better the closer to Christmas the snow fell.

Margie's "Uncle Buford and Aunt Mae" "made up for" having no children of their own by loving their nieces and nephews excessively.



They never visited without bringing them gifts, especially at Christmas. Every child received the same, and one Margie particularly recalled was a small basket lined with brightly colored fabric that closed by draw string. Inside were her favorite store-bought candies with a small Santa Claus on top.

Santa came to see Margie in person for two or three Christmases and once left his track in the soot of the fireplace. She made the mistake of asking her mother why he "had on Daddy's shoes." Later, she learned that her father had had a Santa Claus suit especially made. Not "fancy," it served notice to children and grandchildren to behave, and they shivered in delight when "Santa" peered at them through the window. That warning did not always "take" for Margie. One of her fondest Christmas memories was waking during the night, tiptoeing to the tree, and feeling in her special box for Christmas surprises, which were usually one or two small toys, a couple of oranges and apples, a few nuts, and some candy.

The Christmas decorations, fun for the Coles to gather, were "berried" holly and running cedar growing wild in the woods. They dangled mistletoe in doorways when they could find and fetch it. Their mother said it warned girls "never to give kisses easily." Their tree was decorated with mostly handmade items—paper chains, small Japanese lanterns, sweet-gum balls covered with foil from chewing gum wrappers, a cardboard star also covered in foil, and popcorn chains. They bought their icicles and saved them to use the next year.

Even without snow, Christmas demarked special occasions. Margie's parents married 18 December 1910. The bridegroom borrowed a buggy from Uncle Jesse Spivey, placed a blanket across their laps, and drove them the twelve miles to Jonesboro Methodist Church. They arrived just after the sermon, and most of the congregation remained for the wedding ceremony.

Some swore by Christmas so much they'd

arrange to "go" as close to it as possible. Margie's "Grandpa Duncan," who lived 92 years "one day at a time" without ever worrying about anything "unnecessarily," died peacefully 29 December 1961.

Carol Chalmers Deese and Joan Chalmers Quick, from a prominent African-American family in Sanford, remember how "Aunt Ruby," who never married, spoiled them. She'd send them boxes of clothing at Christmas and arrived from "the big city" smelling of Nina Ricci perfume and doling out shiny half-dollars or quarters. They also remember "Aunt Mammie" saying that, from the bounty of "JuddLand," they could get anything they needed. All they knew was that this family land in Lee County had come down mysteriously in the family and that their father went there to hunt for squirrels, rabbits, and their Christmas trees.

For others, Christmas could mirror both Christ's birth and death. Lillian Frances Kelly (Lanier), also African-American, lived with her grandmother in Harnett County for three years. She remembers her father "fetching her home for Christmas" and being introduced to a baby, her sister Ruby. Years later, on Christmas night, 1969, her husband didn't return from the store. Although his car was found several days later, his body, despite a massive manhunt, wasn't discovered until April. The cause of death was ruled a heart attack, but many questions remained unanswered.

Vivian Monger's family ran "Oliver's," a Sanford department store, from 1926-92, and Vivian remembers crying because, on Christmas Eve, it didn't close until eleven P.M. She was afraid she'd be forgotten when Santa Claus didn't find her asleep in her bed.

Katie Parker married, at sixteen, "a military man" during World War II. She traveled by his side wherever he was sent for five years until he left the service. She worked at Coty (in Sanford) fourteen years before retiring to stand by his side again and take care of him during his sickness and until his death on "Christmas Eve."

Christmas hunting was special, too, and its accounts can be ecological markers. Deer were abundant when the earliest settlers arrived. Thomas Rollins, who lived near the present Coty Plant, wrote (May, 1855) John May in Kentucky that he hadn't hunted since Christmas but had killed eight or ten deer (as well as twenty-seven foxes, run for the sheer pleasure of hearing the baying hounds).

At Christmas, 1936, the Laws family moved from Orange County to the farm of Lonnie Sloan in Broadway. Malcolm and his brothers, sisters, and mother talked his father into coming because they had heard how good Lee County land was for growing tobacco.

Jimmy Morgan, born in Goldsboro but long affiliated with Sanford, was the grandson of a tobacco grower and grew up around the "business of tobacco." He sold his first pile at about fourteen. When the auctioneer at the local warehouse got drunk, the manager fetched Jimmy from school. He went to work "crying tobacco," became one of the best known auctioneers, and worked for sixty years. His annual trek started with the Georgia market

in summer and went north, state by state, to end with the Burley market in Kentucky "after Christmas."

Organized religion frequently found Christmas abused. Many preachers and church officers, particularly among the Presbyterians, kept careful records detailing not only membership and finances but the spiritual condition of congregations, e.g., "Some of the members during Christmas have participated in amusements which we believe to be sinful[,] [and] [w]e could not get our hands on a committee who had hands clean enough to lay hands on the foul practice of drinking and distilling."

Fortunately, because of its joyousness and symbolism of renewal, Christmas remains especially favored as a signpost. Sanford Presbyterian Chapel was built about two years before First Presbyterian was organized (March, 1894). During one Christmas, fire destroyed the Sunday School rooms and severely damaged the sanctuary. All was rebuilt, and, aptly, R. C. Gilmore, who became the minister in 1922, was known for Christmas visits to all of his 417 church members.

In August, 1869, Elder Orin Churchill, pastor of Juniper Springs Church, conducted a revival at the Poplar Branch Schoolhouse. Some of the men present requested his help organizing a new congregation, St. John's Mission (eventually Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church). "By Christmas," Elder Churchill was called as pastor. Swanns Station Baptist Church had its beginnings in 1871 but hired its first fulltime preacher, W. R. Schillinger, in 1966, and purchased a private home, which the pastor moved into "over Christmas." A special project of St. Thomas Episcopal Church is The Joy Tree set up to help the poor at Christmas. Gertha Chalmers sold aluminum cans to purchase the first van for Star Of Hope Church and always decorated one for the Sanford Christmas Parade. Among her many church activities, she took her children to Sutton's Rest Home at Christmas to carol and give gifts.

Malcolm Laws fondly recalls his troop ship, in WWII, crossing the International Date Line and the crew getting to celebrate Christmas twice. Bob Dalrymple, stationed at Camp Lejeune, was given a ten-day leave for Christmas. He was at home eating supper and watching the snow when a taxi brought a telegram ordering him to report back immediately. The troop train couldn't get to Norfolk because of the snow and was sent to New Orleans to meet the ship, which landed in New Caledonia. Even the Military tried to accommodate Christmas.

Much of this information is from Margie Cole Spivey's memoir, *Richness Of Growing Up Poor* (1993), and from *In Celebration of the 2007 Centennial of Lee County: A Collection of Historical Articles and Creative Works* (compiled/edited by Lynn Veach Sadler).

Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler, of Burlington's *The Village at Brookwood*, a former college president, is widely published in academics and creative writing and works as a writer and an editor. As *Central Region Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet 2013-2015*, she mentored student and adult poets.

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THU, DEC. 24: 10th Annual Free Christmas Eve Dinner TAKEOUT ONLY. We'll open at 5 p.m. and serving begins then. Food donations accepted between now and Dec 24.

THU, DEC 31: New Year's Eve Party. We open at 9 p.m. and the party goes until 1:30 a.m. \$45 ea. INCLUDES: glass of champagne at midnight, fabulous heavy appetizers, all non-alcoholic beverages, Breakfast buffet at 12:30 a.m., party favors, DJ music.

FRI, DEC. 25 & JAN. 1: CLOSED

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