



“We Don’t Do that Anymore?” Some Forgotten Christmas Traditions (Part 1)

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Dec 4 2022) Once again, our calendar has turned to December, which means that many of our thoughts turn to the upcoming Christmas holiday. To honor the season, for the next four weeks this column will feature Christmas themed articles.

Since Christmas is one of the largest and most celebrated Christian and secular holidays in the Western World, it has a number of established traditions. There are Christmas trees, Christmas cards, and Christmas carols, to mention a few that seem timeless. But believe it or not, there are some Yuletide customs that have not stood the test of time and are either completely gone and forgotten or observed by very few. Let’s take a look at some of those.

Preparing Sugar Plums: Every time I hear that famous Clement Clarke Moore poem, “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” when I hear the line “. . .with visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads,” it makes me wonder what exactly are sugar plums? Well, it seems that they were once a revered part of Christmas edibles. They began in the 16th century as caraway seeds or cardamon pods that were coated in sugar. Later, the term “sugar plums” evolved to include any piece of fruit that, after it was dried, was rolled in sugar and served as treats—usually for children—at Christmas services and gatherings. But, the dried fruit part of the term was not the origin for they being called “plums.” Instead, that definition comes from the word’s non-fruit related usage, which means “desirable,” as in the “plum position.” Thus, these were the treats most looked forward to by children. The tradition began to wane as we moved away from an agricultural society and our treats began to come more often from a supermarket than Grandma’s kitchen.

Putting Fruitcake Under Your Pillow: This is one that I had never heard of before and found it while searching for Christmas traditions on the internet. Now, fruitcake is definitely something that we associate with Christmas—usually with a stale, ambiguous tasting food gift we received from our strange Aunt Louise—but I had never heard of placing it under your pillow. Well, the tradition stated that if you ate a piece of fruitcake at Christmas time and saved a morsel in order to place it under your pillow while you slept that evening you would dream of who you would one day marry. I suppose that was one way to answer that question, but all I can figure such a practice would get you would be some messy sheets and pillow case to have to wash the next morning. But then again, other than the wonderful ones baked at the Collin Street Bakery in Corsicana, perhaps placing fruitcake under your pillow is a good way to avoid having to eat it.

The “Feast of the Donkey:” This comes from a French tradition that began sometime in the 12th century. To begin the annual Christmas Mass, a donkey would be led in a procession to the local church and then escorted down to the church’s altar to remain for the duration of the service. At an appropriate time in the service, the priest led a call-and-response exercise with the congregants in which they all mimicked the unique bray of a donkey (no word on if the donkey ever joined in). This tradition, of course, grew out of the story that Jesus was born in a stable and that his birth was witnessed by the animals in the enclosure, which included a donkey. The tradition never seemed to move outside of France and by the 16th century it seems to either have died or taken on more symbolic manifestations.

The Twelve Days of Christmas: Today our “Christmas season” essentially begins when Thanksgiving is done—or even before since some stores have begun to open for shopping before anyone has even begun to digest their turkey and dressing. Decorations, trees, carols on the radio, and all the trimmings and trappings of the season commence when November comes to an end and lasts through Christmas Day, or at least New Year’s Day. However, until at least the middle of the nineteenth century and in many places all the way until the early twentieth century, the tradition was almost exactly reversed. Christmas was considered by many Christian sects to be a solemn and “high holy” holiday second only in its reverence to Easter. Thus, the holiday “worked” much like Easter did. Whereas Easter had a weeks long celebration of Lent to commemorate the coming of Easter, the weeks (months, even) leading to Christmas was Advent. Just as it was for Lent, Advent was meant to be a time of restraint for Christians, a period in which one remained righteous, with venerated and sacrosanct periods of prayer and thoughtfulness for the wonders given by God. Advent ended on Christmas Day and thus that is the point that celebration truly began. The tree was trimmed on Christmas Eve and not before, and children received small gifts—usually candy or piece of fruit—on each day until the Eve of the Epiphany (January 6). This final day was known as “Twelfth Night,” which served as the inspiration of William Shakespeare’s play of the same name.

Next week we will continue with an exploration of forgotten Christmas traditions, including “Appointing a Lord of Misrule,” The art of “carol extortion,” and the link between Christmas and “ghost stories.”

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