

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

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Christmas traditions are a part of almost all cultures in the world. I began my project with the intent to focus upon the Southern culture in America and to find many unique customs, but there were not as many differences as I had anticipated. I did find a few customs and traditions unique to the South, but not as extensive as I had hoped. It seems the Reconstruction has finally occurred and the South and North are not as distinct and separated as in the past. I also wanted to discover old family traditions and interesting customs, which I was successful in finding, but these are not as I had hoped to find and share with my family as I wished. Yet, I have these for my own benefit as I was enlightened on the past and on different customs, which could possibly become some new family traditions in my own life. The procedure for collecting my material was to decide on who was accessible for an interview. I definitely wanted to interview my parents as I remember hearing stories of their Christmases as children. My parents have similar backgrounds and like beliefs yet, very different families and I find them very interesting people. My other two informants were good friends of my mother's who I am acquainted with very well. I had mentioned in my proposal that I was going to interview my grandmother, and I did, but I could not use any of the information that she gave me because she "wandered" off the subject more frequently than she stayed on

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the topic. I am glad that I conducted the interview with her as I have very interesting information about her life and I know that I will treasure that very much in a few years. So, I interviewed four people and acquired about three hours of information still, as all of my informants had similar backgrounds, much of my material is repetitive. I made a special trip for my interviews as my schedule allowed and I am happy with my information, but with more time and a free schedule, I could have taken more time to carefully choose and research my informants-to-be and pick a variety who would contrast and enhance each other.

All of my informants were born and raised in Tennessee and all mentioned that they did not have a lot of money. All were raised in the Protestant faith and had similar backgrounds. My father was my oldest informant and the most knowledgeable and effective interviewee. He has a flair for history and would bring that into his answers. Mrs. Martha Tormy was next in age and she has always been a very gentle woman. The interview with her was somewhat difficult as I had not seen her in a long time and I felt uncomfortable conducting an interview with her. We had a fun conversation before we began and I think that I was more nervous than she was and I think that she could sense that and helped to pull things around and allowed me to be in charge. My mother was next in age, and as always she was very talkative and very willing to put forth any information, she was very helpful, as always. My last informant, and the youngest, was Mrs.

Carole Logue, who has been our next door neighbor for thirteen years. She was very casual about the interview, in fact, she took me into her bedroom and she promptly plopped down on her bed as if I was about to reveal a secret about someone. At times it became too casual as we moved from and interviewer/interviewee to a soft conversation which made the tape not pick most of the interview. The interviews, overall, were not that difficult as I thought they would be, but the most painful part was listening to my voice while transcribing the tapes. *ah, yes!!*

In evaluation, I wish that I had better questions and had stimulated the interviewers enough to freely give information and not have to bounce questions and answers back and forth as if we were in a verbal tennis match. I did let my expectations show somewhat, and when an informant stumbled for a word, I offered to help. I suppressed my discomfort with the situation quite well and my saving grace was my personality and relationship with these people. Where I could stick jokes and comments in I did, but I still maintained my composure to show my interest and respect to the interviewee.

All of my informants explained how they prepared for Christmas and almost all responses were very similar. Most began to decorate right after Thanksgiving and I say most as my mother likes to have her decorations up before Thanksgiving. The decorations were relatively simple: greenery, garlands (plant and paper) popcorn strings and

candles. Decorations used now are basically the same, but more elaborate and in a greater quantity. All informants explained how they cut down a tree in their surrounding area for the celebration. My father was the only one, being male, to have this duty all to himself and to build a stand for the tree; all of the others went as a group with friends or family. The decorations on the tree were the same as those used throughout the house, basically what was accessible and inexpensive: garlands, popcorn, berries and homemade ornaments. All informants have an artificial tree presently, but they alternate and buy a live tree occasionally. The decorations now are lights and ornaments, some homemade, especially from their children, and store bought ornaments. Included in the preparations was baking. All told of this being a job that the women in the household had, but younger boys would help sometimes. Items that were baked ahead of time were favorite pies, candy and cakes. My father had the most interesting cake: an Amalgamatum cake, which is a layered cake with a mixture of coconuts, nuts, raisins and other ingredients to form a filling that goes in between the layers of the cake and it is topped with a white icing and coconut. All told how their mothers and older female relatives saved ingredients far ahead of time as these were scarce. Everyone had the traditional sweets and still bake them now, but not as much baking as in the past. As all of my informants mentioned a lack of money so, most of the gifts, wrappings and cards were homemade or reused.

Wow!

Presently, all admitted to hustling and bustling frantically for gifts as was not the case in earlier times. Helping within the community was mentioned by some, but as Mrs. Tormy said, "I'll tell you...everybody was so poor and people really did for their own family." "Now, most give food, clothes and gifts to their churches or organizations where they have a membership. All informants mentioned church Christmas programs which were performed with what their small towns could "make do" to use. These programs were not as elaborate as the services they go to now, but all of them mentioned how special they were then.

Christmas Eve had a few interesting customs within families. Mrs. Tormy explained how her father would go to the small grocery store down the road and buy candy, fruits and nuts and bring it all home in a box. He put the box out on the floor and the family could eat all the sweets they wanted until they went to bed. Mrs. Tormy says, "...that was more fun than Christmas to just sit there and eat all you wanted on Christmas Eve." One interesting contrast was the "Christmas Eve gift" custom. The custom came from earlier times where "Any negro attendant who caught the resident of the big house by surprise with his call of 'Chris' was gift' had the right to a holiday present - perhaps a coin, token etc." This has been a tradition in my family for years, in fact, my family battles competitively to see who wins this year's title of champion and my parents were the only informants to mention the custom. But as interesting

difference was the fact that my father's father, Frank Davis Senior, was "caught" by members of the black community in their town, as he was a friend. These men would shout and receive some money, some cured meat or a small gift, but no one in the Davis family participated within their own household yet, my mother mentions how her grandmother almost always won as she "beat" her family and won. This could be that Mrs. Coffey, the grandmother, grew up with custom and her son, knew of the custom and as my mother pointed out, "Really, I think she did it for her son, she was living with my family and my father, so she did it for him because he'd always have something to give her..." and Mrs. Coffey borrowed a custom from the black community and used it as a joke on her son. Mrs. Tormy was the only Catholic member I interviewed yet, all of the others watch Midnight Mass on television. Mrs. Tormy explained how there have been some changes as Mass has been moved up to 9 o'clock, but there were no major conflicts other than mealtime with the new time. All thought of Christmas Eve as a time for last minute preparations and a time for family.

All of my informants have<sup>ve</sup> the custom of opening presents on Christmas Day. Mrs. Logue was the only one to have both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for opening gifts. She has a very close-knit family, so they go to her mother's on Christmas Eve and open presents between the large family and then her immediate family goes back to their house (a two hour drive) to open gifts in the morning and then they drive

back to her mother's house for the Christmas Day dinner.  
Mrs. Tormy's father would place their gifts by their beds, so  
when they would wake up, they would see their gifts and would  
begin to open them. All of the other informants had the  
whole family up in the morning to open gifts together and  
still do, which Mrs. Tormy does also. Mrs. Tormy was the  
only one who did not have a stocking, as she had the candy  
festival the night before. All of the others had stockings  
or socks that they wore to school as my parents pointed out.  
Mrs. Logue was the only one to have a homemade stocking as we  
know stockings today and she also had little stocking  
stuffers which the others did not. The contents of their  
stockings were about the same: apple, orange, nuts, and some  
candy but both of my parents received fireworks and shot them  
off after they finished opening their gifts and had a big  
breakfast. Religion played a part in all of the celebrations  
but my mother had the most religious and festive with singing  
and storytelling. Presently, religion is downplayed in each  
of the informant's celebration. All had the traditional  
feast for dinner and nothing that did not fit the menu of  
food usually prepared.

Each individual recalled fond memories of Christmases  
past and noted how times have changed. For my informants,  
Christmas was a time that they had special treats and  
received gifts that they did not at any other time of year.  
This can prove why these customs and traditions have remained

have these traditions to remind me.  
of the struggle and hardships so many went through and now I  
now I appreciate this beautiful region even more as I think  
I have been embarrassed at times to live in the South, but  
earlier, but all in all I think my project was a successful.  
Yet, I would have done many things differently as mentioned  
traditions beyond what I thought I knew of Christmas past.  
recorded these customs which provided me with knowledge of  
that my project was a failure, but now I feel proud that I  
the end than I think that I realized. I thought for a while  
in conclusion, I learned more about Christmas customs in  
relaxed as a result of many factors.

somewhat formal affairs, but now they have become more  
frequently left out. Christmases in the past used to be  
part of popular culture that even this historical fact is  
the birth of Jesus, but the celebration has become such a  
part of elite culture as it stems from a historical event;  
customs, religion and crafts. The Christmas tradition is a  
narratives, songs, verse, music, drama, games, cookery,  
Christmas encompasses so many aspects of folk culture -

used to be.  
of passing information of Christmases past and how things  
commercialism has taken its place. This makes the necessity  
of how religion has been left out of the celebration and how  
wanted to pass that excitement to their children. All told  
since they all had exciting memories of Christmas and they

1 Kane, Harnett T. The Southern Christmas Book.  
David McKay Company, Inc., New York, 1958