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Folk Studies:
"My Family Christmas"
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Christmas is a very special holiday for me and my family. It is a time all over the world to celebrate the Saviour's birth, but also a time my family celebrates being together. We do diverse things during the season - things reserved especially for Christmas. Tradition plays a crucial part in our festivities. In fact, I do not remember ever celebrating Christmas differently in my twenty years; and at times when we did leave out even one thing or do something a little differently, it just did not seem the same. Since folklore is essentially '....the material that is handed on by word of mouth or by custom and practice', Christmas at my home is a near-perfect example of a family sharing and passing on certain customs and ideas.

Even though Christmas is December 25, the holiday season begins immediately after Thanksgiving in November. My mother and I always begin wrapping presents at that time upstairs in our home. Red ribbon, transparent tape, silver foil covers

the floor. We wade in the paper and ribbons for weeks. Around the first week in December we bring down the decorations. My mother puts them up all over the house - 'Merry Christmas' is on the door and the mantle, Santa and his reindeer are on the table in the den, and the Nativity scene is in the living room. Mother has around twenty candles that she arranges on a desk and lights them on Christmas Eve; the grandchildren love that. All the lights are dimmed after the presents are opened and one by one the candles are lighted by the youngest grandchildren.

We use an artificial tree and every other year we decorate it in either red and gold or blue and silver. The ornaments we use are both old and new. Some I remember when I was very small, others were bought the year before. Everything from angels to elves can be found on that tree. Even the task of decorating the tree is ritualistic with Christmas music playing in the background and goodies baking in the oven. The most exciting part is putting the Star of Bethlehem on top of the tree and turning on the lights. Every night after dinner we turn on the Christmas lights. It seems Christmas brings out the terminal seven-year-old in me because everything, even the most trivial, is exciting to me.

Since there are sixteen people in my immediate extension family (brothers, sister, in-laws, nieces, etc.), the atmosphere is usually chaotic and loud. We exchange gifts on

Christmas Eve. My mother spends all day cooking the great Christmas dinner - baked ham, cranberry salad, oyster casserole, home-made rolls, sweet potatoes, shrimp salad, and fruitcake are the old stand-bys. In fact, that dinner itself probably holds the widest variety of past traditions. Baked ham came from my father's mother, oyster casserole from my mother's mother, fruitcake from my aunt, etc. It is really interesting to think that the Christmas I know is actually a collage of many Christmases past. The Bible's Christmas story is read before we begin eating.

On Christmas Eve after the huge dinner we all go into the living room and sing Christmas carols. My family is very musical, and we all enjoy this part of the evening. My mother and I play the piano and one of my brothers plays the guitar. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", "Silent Night", "Away in a Manger", "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", and "Jingle Bells" are a few of the standards. Quite often the little grandchildren are so impatient that we cut the singing short and pass out the presents. My mother ALWAYS gives me and my brothers and sister candy. She gives us other things too such as clothes, records, etc., but candy is the one, consistent gift that we receive from her. I exchange gifts with everyone, while my brotheres and their wives and my sister and her husband switch gifts among themselves. After almost everyone has opened his/her gifts, my parents openytheirs. It is a lot of fun after everyone has finished because there are toys to play with and things to put together. My mother brings out the

boiled custard and fruitcake, and we stuff ourselves again. Boiled custard is definitely a Christmas beverage at our house; we never have it at any other time which makes it a real treat.

When I was younger my brother and his wife would spend the night at our house every Christmas Eve, but since they have two children now they do not anymore. No one stays too long after the presents because "Santa doesn't visit little boys and girls who go to bed late." After they leave our neighbors, who are also close family friends, come over and exchange gifts with us. We open our gifts and eat cheese, crackers, dried fruit, and boiled custard. Eating a lot is a crucial aspect of our Christmas. My mother and I then fill the grandchildren's stockings over the fireplace. The oldest if first to youngest (ages range from 17 to w). I go to bed and let Mother fill my stocking, testing my will power.

Christmas morning is a most festive time. The rest of the family comes over early, and the grandchildren run to their stockings. They usually bring something Santa brought them, such as a doll or a tape-recorder. The older guys have the job of putting stuff together and also playing with it. They're just big kids too. We women prepare a nice, big brunch which includes grits, eggs, biscuits and gravy, bacon, and country ham. I think the brunch is enjoyed more than the Christmas dinner because everyone is more relaxed (and the parents are relieved it's almost over). My father never fails to say, "It's all over but the shouting." Honestly, he has said it every Christmas I can remember. We always laugh when he says it.

After brunch everyone leaves to go to friend's or in-law's homes. My parents and I every year go to visit my aunt, uncle and cousin who live in Morgantown, Ky. It is a one-hour drive, and my aunt most often has a nice, light lunch for us when we arrive. We exchange gifts with each other and visit for awhile. They are avid card-players, so we usually end up playing cards until the wee hours of the morning.

The following week is spent going to relative's houses and having great meals. For the most part, the gift-giving is over but not the eating. My mother's side of the family always has a Christmas party. Relatives from all over come, and we get a chance to see people we haven't seen in years. Of course, there is a bounty of glorious food in all shapes, sizes, and colors. The get-together is ordinarily held in a local clubhouse since there are so many of us.

I am sure that Christmas has many meanings for everyone all over the world, but I feel mostly that it is a time for family. I know Christmas would not be the same if I couldn't be with mine. The various customs that my particular family has is no oddity. Every family has their own way of celebrating Christmas. None of my friends celebrate Christmas exactly like I do. Because of region, individual tastes, religion, and ancestry Christmas is the one holiday that can truly be unique to each family. And, although it may be subtle, each family is expressing itself in some way or another by their different traditions and customs. From the Santa Claus on the door to
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the silver garland on the tree, the communication is there. The nuances can be uncovered by knowing and understanding the individuals involved which is a major function of folklore. The certain rituals and traditions that are a part of Christmas play an extremely important role in its importance and significance. Without them it would only be a shallow holiday with no foundation to fall on. Granted my mother's Christmas apple and banana received as a child does not compare with my Barbie and Ken, but our general attitude and conception of Christmas does. Thus, the real beauty and message of Christmas is experienced when I can one day take all my customs, traditions, and beliefs and share them with my own family.

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