



Of Texas Christmas Past

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

There once was a golden era in Texas in which the celebration of Christmas did not focus on costly gifts, or trendy items on sale in shopping malls across the state. It was a time when news coverage of the Christmas season didn't consist of stories about credit card debt, or hunting down the perfect gift for that special someone.

Christmas in Texas in the 1800s was not an easy time by any means, and some Texans had more resources than others. Yet despite the challenges of frontier living, the pioneering men, women and children of that day left behind a proud legacy of hearty spirit and resourcefulness.

In "The Book of Texas Days," Ron Stone writes: "life was never easy in frontier Texas, so Christmas was a great celebration." It was customary for frontier families to decorate their Christmas trees with traditional homemade fare. Near the coast, shells were painted red and green, then hung on trees. One historian noted that Christmas trees were plentiful – everywhere but in West Texas.

In an incredible compilation of stories about Christmas in 19th century Texas, famed Texas author Walter Prescott Webb compiled a list of anecdotes for his 1941 article, "Christmas and New Year in Texas," for the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*.

In those days, many gifts were handmade, reflecting the economic conditions of the givers. His stories include a scene from a German orphanage near New Braunfels in 1849: "For eight weeks the girls had all sewed on the clothes for the boys, and knitted socks, and still they had to work up to the last night."

Nearly two decades later, the price of cotton was high, and gifts reflected the resulting prosperity. In 1868, boys on a Bosque farm received brass-toed, red-topped boots and the first wool hats they'd ever seen, according to Dr. John Frazier, a Fort Worth physician who had been one of those lucky Bosque farm boys.

Webb's stories depict the Christmas spirit of the time – painting a picture of New Year's Eve-style revelry, complete with firecracker displays. And Charles F. Taylor, a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, describes a raucous 1839 Christmas Eve in Nacogdoches this way:

"... tomorrow's Christmas Fiddles groan under a heavy weight of oppression, and heel-taps suffer to the tune of 'We Won't Go Home 'Till Morning,' and

now and then the discharge of firearms at a distance ..."

Of course, the Christmas feast often reflected the economic and geographic conditions these early Texans faced.

Especially in early days, conditions could be fairly primitive. Christmas dinner in 1828 on the Gulf Coast for Mr. D. W. C. Baker consisted of "some hominy, beat in a wooden mortar, and the fresh milk."

But 50 years later, a very different table was set for Captain Jack Elgin, who celebrated Christmas with a surveying party in West Texas. He recalled:

"No prince, potentate, or magnate ever sat down to such a feast. I think we had fourteen varieties of meat. ... We had buffalo, antelope, deer, bear, rabbit, prairie dog, possum, and possibly other animals that I do not recall; turkey, goose, brant, ducks, prairie-chicken, curlew, quail, and other birds."

In a lovely recollection of the holiday spirit in 1841, newspaper editor Charles De Morse wrote in "The Standard" of Clarksville about Christmas in Austin when Texas was an independent Republic:

"The day welcome to all, is close at hand, and we are all ready for it bright wide-awake Texas, whose people are always ready for whatever may come.

"The toy shops will be gay with bright lights and contrivances for extracting dimes, quarters and half dollars of the children ...

"... and tomorrow, the era which the Saviour came to bring about, 'Good will to man and womankind,' will come to us with pleasant temperature, freedom from business cares, and a general appreciation that it is a day for relaxation, for smiling countenances, and hearty greetings."

In that same spirit, may our holiday in Texas this year include warm remembrance of Christmases past.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

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