

Museum News: Christmas in Sanderson

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Early day Christmas in Sanderson tended to be a simple event. Before the advent of rampant consumerism at Christmastime, when Christmas was celebrated shortly before and shortly after the calendar date, community celebrations were centered on the Terrell County Courthouse, which was the hub of all public celebrations, meetings and services in those days.

A community-wide Christmas party and dance was held in the second-floor courtroom. A tree was brought in and decorated with simple ornaments, made by hand. Popcorn strings, sometimes dyed red with fruit coloring, paper birds cut by hand and bits of foil were added to brighten the tree.

At the party, "Santa" would hand out mesh bags of fruit, nuts and "ribbon" candy to the children. Sometimes families brought gifts to be exchanged by drawing names from a hat. Then, the benches were pushed back and a space cleared for the dance. Accompanied by fiddle or harmonica, the little Courthouse trembled with the movement of excited feet.

Home celebrations of Christmas were also simple affairs. Myrtle Carter Higgins, mother of Mary Nell Higgins Hinkle, remembered their Christmas tree was only a small, simple dry mesquite tree that was put up on Christmas Eve morning.

Most of the folks in the history book especially remembered the meals and goodies concocted at Christmastime.

Isable Hunter had vivid recollections of Christmas. She remembered "the Royal dark fruit-cake - chopped and cut and mixed and stirred - slowly baked in the wood stove. What an art baking was in those days, with only a knowing hand held inside the oven to test the temperature to know whether to add a small or large stick of wood to the fire. The fruit-cakes would then be wrapped in snowy damask table-cloths and stored in the buffet to season. "

She also remembered that her father often brought "drummers" - salesmen who made regular visits to their store - home for a meal. Then, at Christmastime, "buckets of syrup, boxes of fruit and nuts and buckets of fresh oysters from Louisiana ... all gifts from our friends "the drummers" ... "would arrive at their door as a thank you for making their lives more enjoyable on the lonely road of the itinerant salesman.

She also remembered that in her day, the community Christmas tree at the Courthouse was a very special event. All the town folk took gifts for the tree, which was decorated with candles, strings of popcorn and ornaments of various types. This was a special celebration that was quite separate from the Christmas observances at home. She remembers it as "very festive and gay." All the ladies made cookies, and gingerbread men were hung on the tree by red ribbons. In her words, "I remember Christmas was the very best time of all!"

Another early-day memory of life in Sanderson at Christmastime was a special event sponsored by the local mercantile store, Hancock and Kerr, children received another mesh bag filled with candy and fruit. Sometimes the only oranges children received or tasted was at Christmas.

The Hispanic community had their own Christmas traditions. A. E. Downie recorded his recollections of those events: "The festivities began with the Posadas, where each night the week before Christmas a group gathered and walked from house to house knocking and asking for a place to stay, as did Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Each night they were turned away until at last on Christmas Eve they were welcomed. But each night, after the ceremony of the pilgrimage, there was a party with feasting and merriment.

"On Christmas night there was much visiting, the serving of many tamales, and always there were Piñatas. Small gifts were given then, but the large special gifts were reserved for the fiesta and dance held on January 12, the night celebrated as the time the Kings brought gifts to the Christ child."

The Hispanics were not the only ones to bring Christmas traditions from their homeland. In those early days there was a sizeable population of English, Scottish and Irish émigrés living in Terrell County. They brought with them the Yule log tradition, plum pudding with rum sauce and standing rib roast with Yorkshire pudding.

But as for individual family traditions, Laura E. Strickland McKinley's family celebrated in this way, out on the ranch: "I remember with joy our Christmas trees at camp; we used any type of large bushy shrub we could find near our camp site. We would make decorations of crepe paper rings and chains, and strings of popcorn and cranberries. We would cut little ornaments from Nabisco boxes (tin) and hang from the tree, so they would glisten by camp fire.

If the weather was sleety or wet, Dad would cover our beautiful tree with one of his big tarpaulins using a couple of long poles and a covered wagon as props. I can still smell the box of oranges and box of apples Dad had bought for the holidays, and a wooden bucket of Christmas candy. We did not have this pleasure all through the year, so it was a special treat during the holidays. We would each use one of Mom's long cotton stockings to hang on the tree Christmas Eve night. My, such wonderful sights next morning, seeing the full socks, stuffed with many kinds of things, and even a tiny puppy one time. He was as happy to see us as we were to see him that morning."

How different those days were from today. How furious modern youngsters would be if all they received for Christmas was a bag of candy, nuts and fruit. But, whose fault is that? When we concentrate on the accumulation of gifts and lose sight of the Reason for the giving we are bound to go to excess.

But, Christmas is all about family traditions. As Isable Hunter put it, "I remember Christmas was the very best time of all! Sometimes we went to the homes of our grandparents for family reunions, but the best were the Christmases when we were at home ... magical memories of childhood ... "

Merry Christmas to you as you celebrate with your loved ones and create your own traditions.

