

1835 Celebration A Gift From President To Children

By LOUISE PETTUS

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In 1835 when Andrew Jackson was in his second term as president, he had living with him in the White House his wife's niece, Emily Donelson, and her four children — plus the two children of his adopted son, Andrew Jackson Jr.

That year, Jackson planned a special celebration for Christmas Day. He sent an invitation to other children: "The children of President Jackson's family request you to join them on Christmas Day, at

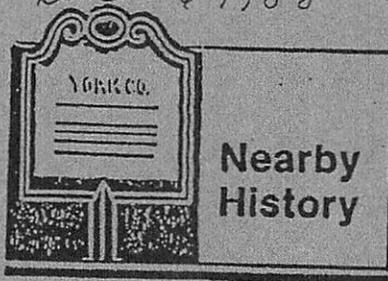


Jackson

four o'clock p.m. in a frolic in the East Room." He gave no details of the plans, not even to the children of the White House. The day before Christmas, Jackson called for a carriage and, taking the children with him, delivered gifts. For Dolley Madison, there was a gift of embroidered handkerchiefs and snuff; Vice President Martin Van Buren received a hand-painted mirror.

As they rode along, one of the children asked the president, whom they called "Uncle," if he thought that Santa Claus would come to their party the following day. Jackson replied that they must wait and see. Then he told them that he once knew a boy who had never heard of Christmas or of Santa Claus and who never had a toy in his life. This boy lost his father and his mother. After her death, the boy had no home and no friends.

Jackson told the children they were now going to an orphanage. The remaining presents in the carriage were for the children of the orphanage. The children always



remembered the visit to the orphanage and one of them, Mary Donelson, wrote that many years later they realized that Andrew Jackson had described to them his own boyhood in the Waxhaws of Lancaster District.

That night President Jackson invited the children to hang their stockings in his bedroom. Two of them had the wit to borrow stockings from their 200-pound "Mammy." The children asked whether they could hang a stocking for him. He looked pleased and said he had waited nearly 70 years before hanging a stocking.

Early the next morning the children raced in to see what Santa had left them. In each stocking was a silver quarter, candy, nuts, cake and fruit in addition to a small toy. The children's stocking for "Old Hickory" contained a pair of bedroom slippers, a corncob pipe and a tobacco bag.

That afternoon the children invited to the frolic found the East Room decorated with greenery and mistletoe. For two hours there were games, dancing and singing.

At 6 p.m., the dining room doors opened. The band played "The President's March." The children marched in two-by-two. Their eyes popped as they took in the special creations of the French chef. With icing and confectionary sugar, the chef had created winter scenes such as reindeer pausing at a lake with small fish and a frosted

pine tree surrounded by animals. There were cakes shaped like apples, pears and corn.

In the center of the table there was a pyramid-shaped pile of cotton-covered "snowballs, lightly frosted, that exploded when struck in a certain manner." After the children had eaten dinner, Jackson showed them how to set off the noise makers and cheered their "snowball fight," which nearly got out of hand as the children filled the air with noise and smoke.

Some of the adults must have been reminded of the tumultuous reception that followed Jackson's first inauguration and viewed the scene with apprehension, but Jackson was obviously taking great pleasure in the children's delight.

Later, when Jackson bid the children goodbye at the White House door, they marched across the lawn still caught up in the spirit of the evening. Dolley Madison, one of a handful of adult guests, is supposed to have said the children reminded her of the fairy procession in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Andrew Jackson, who probably had never read Shakespeare, responded, "No, it makes me think of the words, 'Suffer little children to come unto Me . . .'"

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