

Christmases past looked different, but the spirit was the same

Our ancestors celebrated Christmas differently from us (no malls, no mail-order shopping, no record of Christmas trees in this area before the 1850s). However, evidence is that in very basic ways, the meaning is the same.

So, what was it like more than a century and a half ago?

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

On plantations, the Christmas season was likely to begin with a dance that commenced at sundown and lasted until dawn with happy, and exhausted, participants returning to their homes to sleep the day

through. The following nights – often for a whole week – the dances continued at different plantation houses.

Maurice Moore in his “Reminiscences of York” has described the dances of the 1820s and 1830s. In Halifax, a community about 5 miles south of Yorkville, Dr. Moore said almost every man could play a fiddle. He thought an old gentleman by the name of Ward to be the best.

They called the dance evening a “frolic” instead of a party. By custom, on Christmas Eve the first dance of the evening was a minuet.

Next were six-handed reels with as many dancing as there was space. The reels were followed by a country dance called the German Paw. In the early hours of the morning there was a dance that somewhat resembled the minuet called the Strathspey-Congo. After that came the Irish jigs.

Old Mr. Ward was a good host and his daughter, Ferebee, the best dancer among the young women. Her favorite partner was William Ervin, “esteemed with one consent, the handsomest man of his day.”

The plantation blacks, by custom, did not work on Christmas Day and were free to visit neighboring plantations. In the week before the Christmas festivities began, they had worked hard killing hogs, gathering wood, baking cakes and readying the plantation for the celebration of the blacks

and whites alike. Gifts were exchanged by all.

An account of Fort Mill’s Springfield plantation describes the variety of foods prepared for guests: sugar-cured hams, freshly baked bread, turkeys roasting in an open fireplace with sweet potatoes baking in the ashes and all manner of pastries filling the sideboards with more waiting in the pantries.

The Yorkville Enquirer described the Christmas season in Yorkville in 1858 as a round of parties. A party on the night of the 23rd at the Palmetto started the season with what they called a “pleasant and hilarious hop.” The participants “chased the glowing hours with flying feet.”

On Christmas Eve there was inaugurated a “new-fangled old-fashioned sport – quite a rara avis in Yorkville, however, a Christmas Tree.”

John L. Miller, one of the editors of the Enquirer, decorated a 15-foot tree in his yard with golden apples and dedicated it to his 4-year-old daughter, Hattie Miller. Miller hung some presents on the tree for friends whom he invited to his home for the evening. His Enquirer partner reported that his presents were a “dare-devil-looking knife with a fierce dog handle and an exquisitely-turned Jew’s harp.”

The following day, Sam Moore of Yorkville decorated a tree in the front yard of his house and placed trinkets on the boughs. After that the custom of decorated trees spread widely.

For a long time it was customary to have business at the courthouse conducted as usual on Christmas Day (unless the 25th was on Sunday). A number of old deeds and other documents bear the date Dec. 25.

And was there a Santa Claus in those pre-Civil War years? Yes, but he appeared to be a dwarf with an Eskimo look, a pug nose and a hump on his back. Children were told that Santa Claus loved good children and rewarded them. And yes, the children, with great anticipation, hung their stockings by the fireplace.

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays. The preceding column originally appeared in December 1989.

Dec. 23, 2000