

## December 16, 2007 “Days Gone By”

A number of years ago, I recall going with our family to visit Conner Prairie during the Christmas season. I suspect many of you have made that a part of your holiday, as well. Perhaps you noticed some of what I did, most notably that Christmas in 1837 was quite a bit different from the way we celebrate it today. Now I can't remember all the things that caused me to think that way, but as I did a little research for today, I began to realize that many of the traditions that we follow or have followed weren't yet customary a couple of centuries ago.

For one thing, in the time period of 1830-1860, the pre-Civil War days, December 25<sup>th</sup> was not unanimously agreed upon as the day to celebrate Christmas. The celebrations had varied, some taking place on December 6<sup>th</sup>—St. Nicholas Day, or on January 6<sup>th</sup>—12<sup>th</sup> night or Epiphany. Then the government stepped in and began passing laws that regulated the holiday. By 1861, 16 states had set December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date for Christmas. It was not, however, until after the Civil War that the practice of closing schools, banks and government offices started to occur.

The Christmas tree was just beginning to take hold in the mid 1800's, and obviously, there was no such thing as an artificial tree. It was always the real thing, using fresh greenery that permeated a home with the smell of the season. I think I was a little girl when artificial trees came into vogue. In fact, I even remember some sort of silver or aluminum tree that had a color wheel light that shined on it! That never did seem like the right thing to me!

A lot of us have pictures in our minds of families gathering together to sing Christmas music. The songs in those days weren't much like those we hear playing when we walk through the stores today. They tended to be more of a sacred nature, like “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” or “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” That kind of music really reflected one of the impressions I had at Conner Prairie—the impression that Christmas in 1836 was much more of a religious nature than a secular one.

One tradition that had not taken hold at all was that of sending Christmas cards, so I would have been right in style in the 1830's and 40's. It was not until the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the custom of card-sending began to take hold, and card companies began to appear.

One element that most of us think of as being fairly recent is all the commercialization that so many of us complain about. As early as the

1830's, newspapers were filled with alluring ads trying to snag Christmas shoppers, and merchants were quick to capitalize on the importance of gift-giving during this season.

One article I read noted a newspaper editor's commentary in a Terre Haute paper in which the editor wondered if such behavior was the proper way to celebrate the birth of Christ. He even remarked that, because the trend was already so well established, it was probably too late to change things.

My guess is that most of us can look back on days in our past, and remember traditions and customs that were observed in our families that we continue to treasure. One of the ones I hope our daughter remembers was her reading “Twas the Night Before Christmas” (as soon as she could read) at the dinner table before she went to bed on Christmas Eve. My Dad knew that rhyme by heart, and he would recite it along with her.

After the reading ritual, she would then be allowed to open one gift from her family that was already under the tree. The next morning, no one could go downstairs until everyone was up and ready to go together so we could see what Santa Claus had delivered. I'm absolutely positive that our daughter would never, ever have sneaked out of bed and tiptoed downstairs before the proper time. ☺

All those things took place after we had gone to church on Christmas Eve, and observed the sacred nature of Christmas, trying to keep a balance between the wonderful traditions that had become so meaningful, and the true meaning of the holiday. I suspect that's something that most families here have deal with, too. I have to say that I think it's important to honor both—the real reason for the celebration, and the wonderful opportunity to be with family and friends and to share God's love with one another in a viable way.

Long before I went to seminary, I remember a friend who was considerably older than I sharing a book that was actually a sermon by Peter Marshall. As I recall, Marshall was at one time the chaplain of the U.S. Senate, but he came to the States as an immigrant from Scotland. Some new-found friends opened their home to him on his first Christmas Eve here, and he joined them in decorating the tree, and making Christmas cookies.

Then, as his wife told in the introduction to this little book, the family sang carols around the piano, and as they sang, they all felt the unmistakable feeling of a presence that they could only call God. Catherine Marshall wrote, “**It was something more than just the spirit of Christmas, that spirit of expectancy which warms the heart ...It was as if Christ himself had entered that home and quietly joined the family circle.**” Before Peter Marshall left the family that evening, they all shared in a prayer of gratitude that God had chosen to send the gift of love in the form of Jesus into the world.

It was that experience that caused Reverend Marshall to write his sermon entitled "Let's Keep Christmas." The surprising thing to me in re-reading his sermon was that it has such a timeless quality about it. Although it was printed in the early 1950's, the first words could well have been written today. Marshall began by saying, "Changes are everywhere. Many institutions and customs that we once thought sacrosanct have gone by the board." The preacher went on to say that the notion of Santa Claus arriving by helicopter did not ring true to him, nor was he fond of an interior decorator choosing yellow or blue as Christmas colors. He planned to keep with the true colors of red and green.

Marshall went on to talk about many of the things we talk about each year—the traffic problems, trouble finding a place to park, the difficulty of choosing the right gifts for loved ones. He mentioned the complaints that were heard then and now about the commercialization of Christmas, but he said, "Your Christmas is not commercialized, unless you have commercialized it."

And he spoofed the notion that is often heard that Christmas is only for children, as he commented, "That shows that you have never understood Christmas at all, for the older you get, the more it means, if you know what it means. Christmas, though forever young, grows old along with us."

Peter Marshall went on to declare precious all the various customs that we observe, including caroling, hanging stockings for Santa, setting out the manger scene. He talked about decorating the tree, and adding new ornaments each year, but still valuing the outdated, crooked star that goes on top.

Throughout his message, Marshall said that there is really no need for new and different stories, because there's really only one—the story of the birth of Jesus that we find in the Gospel of Luke. That's the one we almost always use on Christmas Eve, but it never hurts to hear it more than once. I'll share it in the version Marshall used, one that may be familiar to some of us:

"And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

That's it. That's the heart of Christmas. That's what it's all about. We want to hold onto the story of Christmas and all it represents to us; we want to hold onto the old customs and traditions because they strengthen our family bonds and draw us closer to dear friends, and in some almost mysterious way, they make us one with all humanity. That's the reason it's important to honor the days gone by.

Peter Marshall said it best, I think, as he closed his sermon with these words: "So we will not 'spend' Christmas...nor 'observe' Christmas. We will 'keep' Christmas—keep it as it is...in all the loveliness of its ancient traditions." And to that, I say...Amen.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope we are ready to open our hearts to the true spirit of Christmas—the spirit that moves us to be more loving, more kind, more generous. Let us keep Christmas, not just in this season, but in every season.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.