



Christmas Back Then

Most children today link Christmas with receiving toys, plenty of food, decorations, shopping and new stuff. For some adults, it's about spending large sums of money, shopping galore, and plenty of work. For others it is the birth of Our Saviour in a small town called Bethlehem. His story is their centre of focus.

Today, the true meaning of Christmas is lost in the glitz, dazzle and glare, coupled with the hectic activities leading up to this glorious day. After a year of hard labour, many find themselves tired, yet are able to exert plenty of energy during this busy season. But what was Christmas like in 'the good old days'. How did our grandparents and elders celebrate this season of goodwill?

By mid-November, the 'Christmas feelings' was already experienced by everyone, especially the children. All were encouraged to be on their best behaviour leading up to Christmas, so as to ensure that Santa came to their home on Christmas Eve to deliver toys and other goodies. Special shopping began in small amounts. Items were bought and hidden away until Christmas was near. December saw the taking down of drapes or blinds, and the 'putting away' of the house. This usually meant that all the furniture would be packed away in a corner and covered with old bed-sheets. **T**hen the real work began.

All the walls, windows and doors were wiped clean. Furniture and floors were sandpapered then varnished or lacquered; some were polished. The latter was done one or two days before Christmas Day. Stairs were scrubbed, and some amount of painting was done. The entire house was 'cobwebbed', and the yard thoroughly cleaned.

Many old things made their exit in these cleanups, and new items took their places. Many of the toys back then were made locally. Dolls and guns were made by creative people, and this saved plenty of money. Almost all decorations were made at home. New carpets, furniture and dishes were acquired. Scrap-mats were made from scraps of cloth or discarded cigarette boxes. When the countdown for Christmas was about three days away, every evening could be heard the clamour of hammering as everyone raced to get their house ready for Christmas Day.

At schools, the art and craftwork of students during the year were put on exhibition and sold to parents and relatives. Children made all sorts of decorations and Christmas cards back then. 'Pointer-brooms' and crepe paper were used to create beautiful flowers. Calabashes and coconut shells were shaped into vases and ashtrays. Schools also organized Christmas concerts, where children were able to explore the beauty and pageantry of the Christmas story. Christmas closing-parties were great fun, and all these activities added to the excitement and anticipation of Christmas.

Soon, there was wine making and setting, and drink making and storing. Large old bottles and jars were cleaned and filled with all types of homemade niceties. The wines made included Rice Wine, Sorrel Wine, and Corn Wine. Popular drinks made were Mauby, Ginger Beer, and Sorrel Drink. The smell of baking filled many a home. Black Cakes, Sponge Cakes, Fruit Cakes, Buns, Pone, Salara and Bread were baked and stored. All sorts of ingenious ways had to be found to keep these goodies safe from insects such as ants, flies and roaches. Pepperpot, Ham, Garlic Pork, Cook-up-Rice, Black Pudding and Fudge were cooked with care.

By Christmas Eve, the house is all fixed up. New drapes are hung; carpets rolled out; floors polished and shined; walls and windows decorated; and the Christmas Tree (made from a local tree) put up and decorated.

Special dishes, plates and cutlery are brought out. These are only used at Christmas, and on other very special occasions. Some people make and decorate small cribs depicting the Nativity. Paddy was planted in time for it to bloom at Christmas. This was placed in the home as a sign of prosperity for the family.

On Christmas-Eve Night, everyone went to church. All the neighbours went together. All children had to attend. The Midnight Mass was often long, and many heads nodded through it all. After church, loud and joyous greetings were exchanged with everyone on the way home. "MERRY CHRISTMAS, MRS. ALLEN!!!" ... None was forgotten. All the dogs in the neighbourhood went crazy, but this didn't diminish the exercise.

Youths and young adults formed choirs and went caroling. The most popular modes of transportation for this spreading of good tidings were the donkey cart and the feet. All carolers were welcomed, and after singing and greeting their hosts, they were offered goodies, drinks and money.

By the time everyone got home, sleep was almost impossible. Every child knew that Santa would be coming that night to leave them something wonderful. Some even tried to peek, but none were lucky enough to spy this elusive being. Some fortunate kids were taken to see Santa, often kicking and crying. Families went 'window-shopping' to enjoy the fabulous Christmas lights, decorations and toys.

1. What is Christmas like according to a child?

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2. What is Christmas about according to an adult?

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3. A third group of people has another idea of Christmas –what is it?

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4. Why do so many people have a hard time finding the Christmas spirit at Christmas?

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5. List all the activities going on in and about the house in December.

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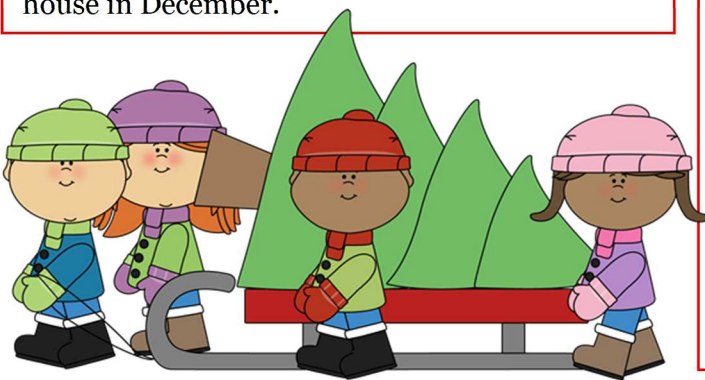
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6. What happened in school at Christmas time?

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7. What food and drinks were prepared?

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8. What did people do on Christmas Eve?

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9. Why did children have a hard time falling asleep on Christmas Eve?

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10. What does it mean to go “window-shopping”?

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