
(COLLECTION OF CATOCTIN CENTER FOR REGIONAL STUDIES)

# CHRISTMAS IN BLUE AND GRAY:

# Keeping the Yuletide in Civil War Camps

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Thomas Nast's first Santa Claus appeared in the January 3, 1863 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, accompanied by an article titled "Santa Clause Among Our Soldiers" that described the scene. In the cartoon, Santa—in a suit of red, white and blue—stands in the back of his sleigh before a mass of Federal soldiers, to whom he has just distributed some gifts. In the foreground are two drummer-boys thrilled by a jack-in-the-box that the jolly man has given to them (the boy on the right being so excited that he seems to have dropped his issue of *Harper's Weekly* on the ground). At left, a soldier holds up a pair of stockings; another brandishes a new pipe in the air. In the distance many men are playing games, including one climbing up a slick pole, others playing football, and even more rushing and tumbling after a greased pig. A fire smokes as Christmas dinner is fixed for the troops. Arches are adorned with evergreens to welcome the most esteemed guest to camp, and the flag of the Union flies high above. And what is Santa showing to all the men in front? "Santa Clause is entertaining the soldiers by showing them Jeff Davis's future," says the article. "He is tying a cord pretty tightly round his neck, and Jeff seems to be kicking very much at such a fate."

"In the army we have no holidays," remarked a Union officer camped in South Carolina during the Christmas of 1862, "to us all days are alike."[1] For many soldiers wearing the uniform of both North and South, this was the reality of four Christmases that passed through the conflict's span. In the midst of winter quarters during this season—the excitement of battle waning in a chilly time of little action or distraction—the soldier must have found it nearly impossible to dissuade his mind from thoughts of family and celebrations in bygone years. However, despite a longing for home and the season's merriment, wistfulness was no exemption from duty.

"It is Christmas morning, and I hope a happy and merry one for you all, though, it looks so stormy for our poor country, one can hardly be in a merry humor," wrote Robert Gould Shaw to his mother while in winter encampment near Frederick, Maryland, in 1861. A Second Lieutenant in the Second Massachusetts Infantry at the time, Shaw described the ruin of his holiday by a dull stint of guard duty during the night, writing, "My Christmas Eve has been very much like other eves during the last six months. ... It began to snow about midnight, and I suppose no one ever had a better chance of seeing 'Santa Clause;' but, as I had my stockings on, he probably thought it not worth his while to come down to the guard tent."[2] Shaw was not alone in having his holiday hindered by military obligation. Most units were required to maintain their regular schedule on Christmas Eve, and to muster for inspection early Christmas morning. However, some officers acknowledged the occasion and released their troops from the usual rigors of duty, if only for the one day.

"Tommorrow is Christmas and we are not goin to drill We are goin to keep Christmas and we are goin to have a little funn [*sic*]...," wrote a soldier of the Fifth New Hampshire with excitement for the levity granted to his company.[3] Such fun often took the form of holiday sports, including running, jumping and wrestling competitions and snowball fights (weather permitting). Chasing a greased pig was also a favorite game, especially as it may have meant a fine Christmas dinner for the captor and his company.[4] Performances of seasonal music by company bands were also a staple of the occasion and were noted to add "some rubber in [the] heels" of an audience afterward.[5] The trimming of camp in festive decorations was yet another tactic meant to capture the spirit of the season far from home, accomplished as well as could be with what was available in the midst of a military camp. To this end, some particularly resourceful Federal troops in winter quarters on the lower Potomac set

out a tree before their tent for the holiday and dressed it—not in tinsel and sweets—but instead with hard tack and pork.[6]

Parting with such ornaments was no doubt difficult for some soldiers, as these standard rations were served for Christmas dinner just as they were on any other night. However, the fortunate soldier may have enjoyed a richer holiday repast, perhaps shipped from home or prepared by citizens local to an encampment. Packages sent from friends and families were anticipated year-round, but perhaps never more so than at Christmas time. Gifts would have provided some small luxury to the austere military life and reminded a soldier that, somewhere, someone was thinking of him. If the parcel managed to find its recipient unmolested by pilfering inspectors or fellow soldiers, home-cooked food from mothers, sisters and wives might have made the difference between a hopeless holiday dinner or one to make "mouths of less fortunate companies water."[7] Accounts from both northern and southern soldiers describe Christmas dinner being salvaged only by the generosity of those behind the battlefront, and one Confederate private camped in Virginia during the first year of the war mused on the phenomenon: "Well may we enjoy such a dinner when we pause for a moment and think how did we happen to get it!"[8] Indeed, it must have been quite a morale boost for the enlisted man estranged from the family table to have a bit of that longed-for meal come to him. Samuel Alexander of the Sixty-Second Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry recorded the delivery of a box to his mess on Christmas Eve containing a much-appreciated turkey and other provisions. However, despite the pleasant feast that ensued, Alexander wrote, "I was not as happy as I was when I ate Christmas dinner one year ago with my dear wife and I hope before another Christmas rolls around that we may be together never more to part."[9] As enjoyable as these home-dispatched meals were, the most important ingredient was still missing: home.

Seasonal delicacies were delivered not only by family, but also common citizen supporters. Agencies such as the Ladies' Union Relief Association were organized across both warring territories, soliciting donations of food and other necessities to supply needy troops. In the North during the winter of 1863, these groups collected five thousand roasted turkeys and delivered them "with all the *etceteras*" to the Army of the Potomac for holiday dinner in its camps, a testament to the organizations' efficacy.[10] Where this assistance was unable to extend, individuals often shared with local soldiers what they could. Randolph McKim of the Second Maryland Infantry, stationed near Staunton, Virginia, one Christmas, was taken in by a family and fed a banquet that included oyster soup, turkey, ham, beef, lobster salad, plum-pudding, pound cake and coffee. The extent of the bill of fare was not lost upon McKim, and he commented that one "must not suppose people, generally, are so fortunate."[11] The role of benefactor was reversed at times, with the soldier giving back to a loyal and generous public. Following the first battle at Fredericksburg in 1862, with the city in shambles and citizens displaced in the days after the firefight, soldiers under the command of General Robert E. Lee shared their rations with the townspeople so they would not go without a Christmas dinner.[12]

Even when a soldier managed a proper holiday dinner, it seems Christmas was nevertheless incomplete without a draught of eggnog. Troops always anticipated a nip of the seasonal libation, and foraging for ingredients at times went to desperate lengths—many a purchased or pilfered egg being combined with what was *most* essential to the concoction: alcohol. Camped in Centreville, Virginia, during the Christmas of 1861, soldier Tally Simpson of the Third South Carolina Volunteers described the eagerly-executed preparation of his mess's "nog" in a letter to his sister, writing, "You had better believe there was a rattling of plates and spoons and knives" as it was mixed.[13] Though none of Simpson's companions arose the next morning with what he dubbed "the 'big head'," the effect of eggnog—which seems to have been available even when Christmas meals were not forthcoming—proved disastrous for many other units.[14] One particular bout of large-scale holiday drunkenness recalls the march of a portion of the Tennessee Brigade out of Strasburg, Virginia, on Christmas Day, 1861, to meet General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in Winchester. After supping on fortified eggnog the prior evening and that morning,

so many men fell out of line on the road that the brigade's file closers were forced to tow entire wagon-loads of intoxicated soldiers as they continued the march.[15] Merrymaking often turned violent when soldiers had their fill of the stuff, causing chaos in camp and making life rather difficult for sober guards charged with keeping order. Shaw, in the same letter written in camp near Frederick, wryly remarked that the beginning of his Christmas Eve "was principally occupied in taking care of two drunken men (one of them with a broken pate)."[16] Similar descriptions abound in tales of holiday "spirit" consumption; it seems that, with liquor's propensity for bringing out the devil in men, many pent up angers about the war and distance from family found ample release on what should have been a joyful occasion.

Perhaps not *all* days were alike for the good soldiers of the Union and Confederate armies; on Christmas at least, it seems many experienced some small sense of festivity known in years prior to the war. However, the undertone in most letters and journals documenting the day is in consensus: no meal could fill the craving for family; no eggnog could numb the pangs of a lonesome heart. No matter how convicted a supporter of his cause, many a soldier longed for home and family. Camped in Virginia just days after the Battle of Dranesville, Eighteenth Mississippi Infantry Regiment surgeon James Montgomery Holloway, in a letter to his wife, Annie, written early on Christmas Day of 1861, rather poignantly summed up what were probably the most typical of any soldiers' thoughts during the holiday:

> My Dearest Wife and Babies: A healthy Christmas to you all … I can't say a happy one (tho' I wish it) for happiness is not ours—until we all meet after the *war*. We may be joyous and gay for the season, but that joyousness and gaiety is mingled with concern and apprehension for the condition of our beloved country—for our absent loved ones …
>
> You have no idea how lonesome I feel this day … It's the first time in my life—that I am away from loved ones at home … I presume you are in New Orleans—and in a few hours the house will be all astir—the children crazy over their stockings. Were I there, I'd fill them up to the rim with Bon-Bons—I'd make them think for one day that plenty abounded—that no war existed—and that each was a king or queen … [17]

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## Eggnog

1 egg, separated
1 tablespoon molasses
1/3 cup whole milk
1/3 cup rum or whiskey
1/3 cup cream

Beat yolk and molasses together, then stir in rum or whiskey (rum is sweeter) and milk. Whip cream to heavy peaks. Vigorously whip egg white until frothy, then add to whipped cream, mixing thoroughly. Scoop whipped mixture into liquid and gently fold together until smooth. The final mixture will separate and can be served either with the foam floating on top or remixed, chilled or at room temperature. Makes about three servings.

1 William C. Davis, *A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and Gray* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2003), 113.
2 Kevin Rawlings, *We Were Marching on Christmas Day: A History and Chronicle of Christmas During the Civil War* (Linthicum, Md.: Toomey Press, 1995), 39. Shaw later achieved fame with the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry.
3 Ibid., 41–42.
4 Ibid., 42.
5 Ibid., 45.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 43–45.
8 Davis, *A Taste for War*, 115.
9 Rawlings, *We Were Marching on Christmas Day*, 40.
10 Davis, *A Taste for War*, 115.
11 Rawlings, *We Were Marching on Christmas Day*, 76–77.
12 Davis, *A Taste for War*, 116.
13 Guy R. Everson and Edward H. Simpson, Jr., ed., *"Far, Far from Home": The Wartime Letters of Dick and Tally Simpson, Third South Carolina Volunteers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102.
14 Ibid., 101.
15 Rawlings, *We Were Marching on Christmas Day*, 46.
16 Ibid., 39.
17 Holloway to Annie Wilcox Warren Holloway, Mississippi Hospital, 25 December 1861, Virginia Historical Society, *Papers, 1861–1905, Section 1*, manuscripts, Mss1 H7286 a 1–130, 16; cited with permission from E. Lee Shepard, director of manuscripts and archives.