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Christmas Day

By Hon. Francis D. Winston

Every man and woman in Bertie County knows when and why we have a Christmas day. We are a God fearing and a Bible reading people. I comply with your request and give you some thoughts on the words "Christmas Day."

The word Christmas is composed of two words, Christ and mass; Christmas. The word mass is taken from the Latin language. It is now the common name for the celebration of the Lord's supper in Roman Catholic Churches. It is easily seen that "Christ mass" is therefore a religious ceremony in memory of the birth of Christ, the celebration of his nativity.

The first celebration of the birth of Jesus, honoring his birthday, is of doubtful origin. It is impossible to fix with exactness, the date of the earliest "Christmas." Of course the day on which our Lord was born is not known. A record that records it would be priceless and most sacred.

By the Eastern church the sixth day of January was held in commemoration of the birth of our Saviour. Many of your older readers will recall that January sixth "Old Christmas Day" was much favored by the old people of half a century ago. Our colored people in the days of slavery were partial to "Old Christmas." When I was a child I remember old colored people, on old Christmas night, going out to watch the cattle "praying." They claimed that on this night the cattle kneeled in prayer.

Some writers place the formal celebration of Christmas as early as A. D. 138. However uncertain that date may be, it is very certain that traces of such celebrations are found in Sacred writings of the year A. D. 180. Profane history tells us that during the reign of a Roman Emperor-Diocletian and while he was holding his court at Nicomedia, in the year A. D. 285 a multitude of Christians assembled in that city and were celebrating the birthday of the Nazarene. The heathen ruler set fire to the building in which the Christian worshippers were gathered and all of them perished in the flames.

For centuries there was a want of informity in the time of observing the day among the early churches. Many held the festival in January. Others celebrated it later, in the spring time. It is probable that in the fourth century the date we now celebrate was fixed upon. Julius, a Bishop of Rome is credited with bringing this about.

It was not a mere casual, or arbitrary, date that was agreed upon. All nations regarded the winter solstice as the turning point of the year, from dying leaf to opening bud, the beginning of the renewed life and activity of the powers of nature. For this reason the date near the solstice was agreed upon by the churches and made a fixed and immovable feast, for the celebration of Christmas, the day of the death unto sin and a new birth into righteousness. Of necessity the early Christians adapted many of the heathen usages of the times to the purposes of Christianity. Many a heathen custom became incorporated into the most sacred of our religious rites and ceremonies.

We have customs connected with Christmas day of interest. Did time permit I would trace them out. The custom of decorating churches with holly and evergreens is a very ancient one. Every home in Bertie county should be so decorated on Christmas Day.

Some times these customs have no conformed to the spirit of this sacred day. When I was a small boy the main incident of Christmas day, in Windsor, was the turn-out of the "Johnnie Cooners" or "Rag-a-Muffins," men dressed in every fantastic garb, with masks on, or faces blackened, who rode the streets in solemn procession. Happily the things that do not fit in with the day are fast disappearing. A growing custom is the Christmas tree. It seems that this custom can be traced to the Roman "Saturnalia" a feast, and it was no doubt carried into Germany by the Roman Legions, who conquered that country. The Christmas tree



comes to us from the "Fartherland" with its red berries and odorous pine, its lights and hanging toys, all so dear to childhood. I commend the custom of a public "Christmas tree" for the benefit of the children of the less fortunate of life. Do you really want to enjoy this Christmas more than any of your life? Then give bountifully, without ostentation to those who have not had the chance in life you have had.

"Christmas Carols" and "Manger Songs," were soon added as a part of the ritual of the church. More and more the day is coming to be a real celebration of the Redeemer's birthday. It would be a beautiful custom if in every community in Bertie Co. a choir of mixed voices proclaimed the coming of the day with beautiful hymns; sung from house to house.

Of course childhood hours is the night before Christmas; an eager and an expectant hour. The little ones finally fall asleep. "Santa Claus" or "Kris Kringle" or "St. Nicolas" or "Snekey Goody" or the "Gift Spirit" pays the visit which brings them joy at morning dawn. Happy hour! Yes indeed! there is a real Santa Claus! Does he dwell in, you? If not, then seek him out and make him your best friend. The name Santa Claus is the same as the name Saint Nicolas. The word Santa is a corruption of the German Sanct and of the Latin Sanctus and of the English Saint. The word Claus is a corruption of Nicolas. By dropping the first two letters and by rapid pronunciation of the remaining two syllables you get our pronunciation of the old Santa name. Santa Claus is therefore our nick-name for Saint-Nicolas.

Christmas has ever been observed in the South. An honored son of Bertie County has drawn a truthfully touching and eloquent picture of our old time Christmas. He lived to the sunset of our country. His heart was ever with his childhood home. In Dec. 1903, he wrote of the coming Christmas. He died the next Easter morning. I firmly feel that as he penned those sacred words his eye was gazing on the walls of the Golden City. Read his words and you will feel the real Christmas Spirit.

CHRISTMAS

(From Winston's Weekly, Spokane Washington, Dec. 19th 1903)

Next Friday will be Christmas. No other day recalls so many sweet memories. As I think of it the past comes back to me like a happy dream I am once more a child. I see the face of my father. I feel his arms around me. I hear his voice. I see mother. Her face is aglow with the light of love. The well filled stocking hangs by the chimney corner. The first light of a soft Southern Christmas morning is creeping through the window blinds I hear the stealthy footsteps of the house servants as they creep to the door to "catch" old masters "Christmas Gift."

"Christmas Gift Master," Christmas Gift," Mistis," I hear them now, I see the village church above whose simple altar were inscribed in letters made of Southern foliage "Peace on Earth, Good Will To Men." I behold the faces of the little congregation radiant with the Spirit of Christmas, so many of them bound to me by ties of blood and love. I hear the voice of the choir chanting the Christmas carol and the peal of the organ reverberating within walls, decorated with glossy holly and redolent cedar. Once more I take my place at the table and partake of the Christmas cheer. Around that hospitable board are gathered father and mother, brothers and sister. The old black mammy arrayed in all the glory of Christmas gifts, the ebony butler beaming with pride, the good old house keeper bustling and nervous lest something be wanting to complete the feast, for whose perfect appointment she holds herself responsible, the eager and expectant faces of the little darkies, peeping in the door, the table loaded with everything good to eat, cooked only as old aunt Charlotte could cook it, the Christmas tree ready to be lighted in the center of the table I can see it all and hear my father's voice saying "Bless Oh Lord these mercies to our use and us to Thy service."

When all is over, the happy greetings the bountiful feast, the gifts of loving hearts, and the day consecrated by the faith of centuries is done and

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