

The Lighthouse

Matecumbe United Methodist Church
"Bringing the Light of Jesus Christ to Our Islands"

Christmas Traditions: Christmas is celebrated is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. It's the most wonderful time of the year when families come together to delight in time-honored traditions. Decorated trees, cheerful ornaments, classic holiday songs and hymns, candle light church services are just some of the things we look forward to during the Christmas season. But, how have these celebrations changed over time? Join us as we take a peek into Christmas stories from the past told by some of our church members.



Carol Wagner has fond memories of her Aunt Millie arriving at Christmas time from Worthington, Massachusetts, loaded down with gallons of homemade maple syrup from Millie's sugar house on the farm. Carol has never forgotten that special treat every Christmas – "The best maple syrup I ever tasted." There are just a few farmers in New England that "sugar" the traditional way – "tapping out" buckets of sap, boiling it with a hardwood fire to ensure the original maple flavor. Carol was lucky she had Aunt Millie when she was a child. Most of us settle for the Log Cabin variety of syrup with the artificial flavoring.



Judy Winstel remembers teaching Sunday School in a class of 3-4 year olds. At Christmas they dressed up as shepherds and wise men for a church program using bathrobes, sheets and towels to create the costumes. For most of the young kids, it was their first taste of the Bible story about the birth of Jesus. How thrilled they were to be a part of the congregation's Christmas celebration, proudly stepping onto the stage in front of an audience of over 100 members of the church.

Matecumbe United Methodist Church

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November 2021

Barbara Haudenshield: Christmas has become such a huge commercial time of year in recent decades, people start decorating even before Thanksgiving. When I was a young child in the 1930's, Christmas Eve meant going to bed very promptly so Santa Claus would come. Years later, I understood that discipline as Santa not only brought tangerines, walnuts, and trinkets to put in the stockings and nice gifts for under the tree, but he also brought the tree, strung the lights, added fancy glass ornaments, and hung the tinsel on that tree. The most memorable of those years was the one when I finished opening the gifts under the tree before I saw a really special gift.... a Toy Manchester Terrier puppy on the window sill.

I am not sure how my parents got to bed so I could, excitedly, wake them up early to go downstairs to see if Santa had come! And, we never questioned how all that stuff came from his sleigh!?!



We lived in a small close knit neighborhood of about 100 families with a park centrally located. As a Brownie, then a Girl Scout, I was part of a troop that decided to raise money to build a one room cabin with a large fireplace and kitchenette, in the park. We girls did various kinds of jobs for anyone and everyone, charging a quarter an hour. After several years our dream came true, surely with some financial support we weren't aware of at the time. The cabin was built. There was a large pine tree in the park and a new Christmas Eve tradition emerged with the whole neighborhood gathering about 8 o'clock to sing Christmas carols around the decorated tree, then gathering in the Girl Scout cabin for hot cider and cookies.

Esther Dieujuste reports that in Haiti when she was young, each year the churches wrote and recorded an original song which was entered into a contest. The recordings were played in November and part of December and then a winner was declared.



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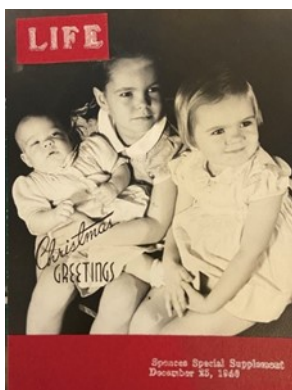
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Sue Miller: When I was in kindergarten, a small public elementary school in 1949, my class, just 15 of us, were to memorize the story of the birth of Jesus from the Bible, Luke 2:8-14. I was the only one in the kindergarten able to remember the whole thing. Shy as I was, I got up on the stage and recited: "And in that region there were shepherds out in the field...." When I was done, I heard my big sister cheering! I'll never forget that Bible verse or my big sister's cheers. She still cheers for me. But I don't think there are still public school children reciting from the Bible for Christmas programs.

Sending Christmas cards was an important tradition for the Spences. My dad was an amateur photographer long before digital cameras. He developed the film in a makeshift darkroom – our one and only bathroom! Certainly disrupting bath time.

Dad created unique Christmas cards starring his three daughters. The Christmas card tradition continued until my mother died in 1994. The Christmas cards were the Spence family's opportunity to keep in touch with special friends. When the cards were exchanged, happy memories came to mind of the joys people bring to each other. Before she died, my mother had over 500 dear friends she kept in touch with every Christmas via the unique and personal cards, hand addressed with personal notes on most.



Gail Gargano: Gail grew up in the Bronx. She remembers what a close-knit neighborhood it was – stores along the street with apartments above all along "the Avenue." Every day after school the kids all played outside. Everyone knew everyone in the neighborhood. Gail's father, Paul, owned Paul's 5¢ & 10¢ store. The store was a true department store, selling toys, small appliances, fabric and yarn, hardware, magazines, candy and more. Gail worked at the store from when she was 12 until she graduated from college. Gail's family worked long hours during the Christmas season and well after normal closing hours on Christmas Eve, to make sure that all of their customers were able to get Christmas decorations and special gifts before the big day.



When she was five, Gail got a Shirley Temple doll for Christmas, her dream come true! And then every Christmas her dad placed the doll dressed in Christmas pajamas under a Christmas tree that decorated their store window. Christmas day was a rare day off and the whole family, including aunts and uncles and cousins gathered to eat, play cards and board games and then eat some more.

Rich Russell remembers that Ruth Albury, the youth choir director at Matecumbe United Methodist Church, had a pump organ and from about 1962 to 1968 the church kids were loaded into a couple trucks with the organ and made several stops around town singing Christmas carols, much to the delight of local residents.

Each year through the 1990's Rev. Dick Smith directed a Christmas Cantata on a Sunday night before Christmas, featuring both the adult choir (Oma Russell director) and the youth choir (Ruth Albury director).

Some familiar names were in that choir: Rich Russell, Juanita Russell Knudsen, Kirby Klys, Janet Wood, Alan Wood, Randy Baad, Carl Lindback, Danny Cockerham, JC Russell, Buddy and Jack Pinder, Frankie and Gary Brothers and Sheryl Guerry.

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Ken Knudsen: What stories the Knudsens can tell!

Ken's mother, Cynthia, now 93, loved to ride horses through Central Park as a young teenager, so it was quite a celebration in 1945 when she received her very own horse for Christmas at age 14. But perhaps Cynthia's most fascinating Christmas memories were of her uncle who in the early 1920s, when commercial transatlantic flights were a novel thing, flew across the Atlantic to play the banjo for England's Queen Mary!

When he was just a small child, Ken remembers riding around Miami in a red Ford pick-up truck with his father, a construction supervisor, visiting job sites. At the young age of 5, Ken got a steel erector set for Christmas as he surely wanted to be able to build just like dad.



Ken's funniest story – when Rachel and K.C. were quite young, they crawled into bed together on Christmas Eve, barely able to sleep as they were so anxious for Santa to arrive. In the middle of the night they finally heard noises – that clatter on the rooftop – surely the “miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer....” Little did they know, their dad had crawled up on the rooftop and was jumping up and down sounding just like jolly ole St. Nick.

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Henry Rosenthal recalls when he was about four years old the family returned home on Christmas Eve from a visit with his grandparents. When he got home, his father picked him up and rushed him through the living room to his bedroom. What was going on! Young Henry didn't know why he was restricted in this way. Santa had come a bit early to put up the Christmas tree and decorate both the tree and living room, leaving gifts.

His parents were trying to hide the decorated living room and hold off the excitement reserved for Christmas Day when Henry was supposed to wake up early and see what Santa did “overnight.” Henry still remembers how upset he was... Over 75 years later!

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Kathy Sill and her family traveled for over 12 hours when she was young to visit the grandparents in Oklahoma every Christmas. The car was crowded with three kids, parents, two dachshunds and a trunk full of gifts and suitcases. The roads were often icy. Her grandparents lived on a farm so the kids loved to see the cows, chickens, guinea fowl, and the horse. They pushed the stray cat around the farm in a baby buggy. When they got to the farm for Christmas they would cut down a fresh pine tree and help decorate it with glass ornaments, lights and tinsel. Grandma was adored by the kids, loving her fresh baked coconut candy, fudge and cookies. Kathy caught her very first fish at the pond on the farm with a cane pole. No they didn't eat it – it was a goldfish.

It was when Kathy was about 7-8 years old that she first figured out that she had been tricked, regarding Santa. The adults sent the kids out to the barn and when they returned to the farmhouse, there were the gifts from Santa Claus! Kathy just knew that something wasn't right! She knew then that Santa wasn't real.

Borden Makepeace: Born in 1934, Borden insists that his memory is just fine. In fact he remembers Christmas when he was just three years old. He had a cousin 10 weeks older than he was and they went to their grandparents for Christmas. There were two wonderful gifts, riding toys. Borden loved one and his cousin loved the other. It wasn't until the next day that Borden found out that both had been gifts for him. So why was his cousin riding his Christmas present? A major fight between the boys ensued with loads of screaming.

Borden reported that back then, he had hair but no teeth. His cousin had teeth but no hair. With no hair for Borden to pull, Borden pulled both of his cousin's ears. Borden's aunt, the cousin's mother, insisted that the fight was fair as, after all, it was Borden's riding toy!

Hard to imagine that Borden would be a fighter, but if you have no hair, you might want to stay away from Borden and his wheelchair.