

## Christmas customs of the past

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There are few recordings of how early Solano County settlers prepared for or celebrated the Christmas season. Customs surely varied widely based on each family's immigration background. Taking a day off from work and having the means to create a well-cooked meal likely were the highlights for early pioneers.

Spanish settlers celebrated Christmas with a Christmas Eve religious service in settlements where there was a church, followed by a day of rest and a special dinner.

Gold miners in the camps had to create their own traditions.

In 1850, Francis D. Clark celebrated a "Christmas jollification" with a group of other young men in a cabin on the Mokelumne River:

"What cared we if whisky was \$20 a bottle, flour \$2 a pound, one pound can of oysters one ounce of gold fresh beef one dollar a pound, salt fish two dollars, etc., etc.? Oh what happy days those were when after a hard day's work we returned to our domicile to partake of the feast the "Cook of the Mess" had awaiting us.

"Tis true we had no luxuries, but we possessed robust health and an excellent appetite, and our sleep was as sound on the pine boughs which formed our mattress as ever enjoyed since on a mattress of softer material."

William Kelly, another miner who worked a claim on the Trinity River, recorded of the miners in his camp that they observed Christmas "if not with a devotional reverence, at least by an abstinence from all labour on that day, which, from earliest childhood at home, we are taught to look forward to with a rapturous eagerness."

Their group feasted on a grizzly bear loin, six bottles of wine, two pounds of raisins and other dishes.

Kelley described how he and his friends worked so that "together with the contents of our own larder and cellar, furnished us such a dinner as dwellers in the mountains are rarely enabled to enjoy, each member of the mess undertaking that portion of the preparation he was best prepared to deal with; one agreeing to bake, another to roast the venison, another to boil the bacon, one gentleman taking in charge the manufacture of short and sweet bread, a second choosing for his department the pies, made from

preserved apples; but Captain S—r's was the chefd'oeuvre of the feast, being a plum-pudding, made ship-shape, not to be excelled in composition, which he launched into a liquid so truly exquisite and congenial, as to leave one in doubt whether to prefer the pudding or the sauce.

"The part assigned to me was to rig a table, and get the Sheffield ware in order, which I managed admirably by means of the front and end boards of the wagon, making shins of willow sticks, that squeeled and bent, not being far enough advanced in years to 'groan' under the superincum-bent profusion, a purified-waggon-sheet serving the purposes of the cloth; and, if the cutlery was not all to match, it was matchless in its peculiar variety, a sufficiency being secured by supplying the carvers with bowie-knives, and short swords in lieu of their legitimate instruments."

The same ingenuity in creating a feast out of the supplies at hand is also reflected in Luzena Stanley Wilson's tale of her first Christmas dinner party, which she gave in 1852.

"The second Christmas of our stay in the Vaca Valley I gave a dinner party, and invited all the Americans in the valley; even then I entertained only five guests. My dinner party was considered very fine for the time. My cook was a negro of the blackest hue, who had formerly cooked for some army officer, and was accustomed to skirmishing, as he expressed it. The menu included onion soup, roast elk, a fricassee of lamb, boiled onions, the home-grown luxury of radishes, lettuce and parsley, dried-apple pies, and rice pudding. Fowls were too rare and valuable to be sacrificed, as yet, to the table, and probably had they been killed would have defied mastication, for they were, like ourselves, pioneers."

I wish all my readers a wonderful Christmas season!

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