

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Christmas at Fort Davis

Christmas was often one of the loneliest times of the year for soldiers on the frontier. To compensate for being separated from family members and friends back East, officers and enlisted men spent weeks preparing for the arrival of Santa Claus and the holiday season. Parties, dances, and the bestowing of presents were all part of celebrating Christmas.

Traditionally on Christmas Eve, a grand ball or “full dress german” was held in one of the enlisted men’s barracks. The dancing usually began by 9:00 p.m. All the officers and ladies of the post were present along with invited guests from nearby communities and towns. At midnight a supper was served, and after the meal dancing resumed for two to four more hours. At Fort Davis in 1883, a newly completed barracks occupied by Troop B of the 10th U. S. Cavalry was the quarters chosen for the ball and dinner. “Two beautiful Christmas trees laden with every variety of fruit” helped to decorate the building. A highlight of the evening was a waltz contest. The winners received a large chocolate cake with the letters “B-10th Cavalry” inscribed across the top of the icing. After the customary midnight supper, dancing continued until 2:30 a.m. when the band played “Home, Sweet Home” and the guests retired to their homes.

Children were always given very special consideration during the holiday season. All the children of the garrison were invited to one special party that was usually held at the home of the post commander. Here the children were feasted with cake and punch, and they were present for the first lighting of the Christmas tree.



Every child was presented with a small gift, and sometimes the post commander himself dressed up as Kris Kringle.

In 1883 at Fort Davis, a party for all the children was held on Christmas Eve in the decorated rooms of the post chapel. The children danced and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. According to Harvey Forsyth, the son of Commissary Sergeant Thomas Forsyth who served at Fort Davis from 1885 to 1890, it was a custom for one of the enlisted men to dress as Santa. With the assistance of other soldiers, “Santa” would distribute candy at each quarters where children resided. Instead of arriving in a sleigh, “Santa” would come in a mule-drawn wagon. It was an exciting time, anxiously awaited by all the children of the fort.

Christmas Day was celebrated as enthusiastically as Christmas Eve. Fires were started early in the kitchens of the enlisted men’s barracks for the preparation of elaborate noon meals. Religious



Mess hall at a frontier fort decorated for Christmas



services were held at the post chapel, and afterwards the men returned to their barracks for feasts that included roast pig, turkey, chicken, cakes, pies, and puddings. Christmas dinner was the most sumptuous meal of the year and was a welcome change from the usual ration and monotony of garrison life.

The celebrations of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were part of a number of festivities held during the holiday week. At Fort Davis, informal hops were given by officers, non-commissioned officers, and individual troops. In addition, numerous dinner parties and socials kept the officers and their families on a holiday merry-go-round.

Christmas was the time of year when traditional social class barriers between officers and enlisted men were broken. It was a festive time, which united the entire garrison in a special way. The good times of the Christmas season were long remembered and the arrival of the next holiday season was always joyfully anticipated.



**View of Christmas at a
frontier fort**

