



Holidays with Harry



Christmas as a Child

“We came downstairs in the morning and there were our stockings filled. My parents told us that Santa Claus had been there during the night.” These were Harry Truman’s earliest Christmas memories of himself as a three-year-old waking up Christmas morning in his grandparents’ farmhouse in Grandview, Missouri.

Christmas as a Parent



The Truman’s Christmas Tree, 1926.
Truman Library

Harry and Bess Truman’s only child, Margaret, were born in 1924. They doted over their daughter and saw to it that her childhood Christmas mornings were as wonderful as their own had been. Margaret later wrote, “From the earliest memory, for me Christmas has been a season of sugar and spice and everything nice and myself on tiptoe with excitement.”

Outside the Truman home, a cedar wreath adorned the front door. Inside, a live tree stood in the living room and was decorated with ornaments passed down from generation to generation. The tree always displayed a special red ball that had decorated Margaret’s first Christmas tree.

On Christmas morning, the family would gather around the tree and open their gifts. Afterwards, they moved into the dining room. Margaret remembered: “The smell of cinnamon and cedar and spruce and the waxy smell of burning candles;

the thirty-pound turkey, brown and smoking from [the] oven; the fruit cakes and the chocolate cakes; the preserves and pickles and creamed onions and the striped peppermint and oranges; the grandmothers and the uncles and aunts and Daddy and Mother around the groaning table; the nickel-plated tricycle under the tree and the sleepy doll that came in my stocking!”



Christmas greetings from the Trumans in 1945 and 1946.
Truman Library

Christmas as a President



The Trumans at the White House.
Truman Library

Once Harry Truman became president, maintaining holiday traditions became difficult. Christmas, though, was an exception. Although the visits home were short, the president spent all but two of eight holidays at his home in Independence. One year during a radio address he said, “I have come out here to Independence with my family to celebrate the great home festival. For of all the days of the year Christmas is the family day.”

These traditions offered the president respite from the demands of the White House. “As I came up the street in the gathering dusk,” he remarked, “I saw a hundred commonplace things that are hallowed to me on this Christmas Eve—hallowed because of their association with the sanctuary of

home. “I saw the lighted windows in the homes of my neighbors, the gaily decked Christmas trees, and the friendly lawns and gardens. I looked at all these familiar things—the same things that you all will see tonight as you go toward home.”

Christmas as a Grandfather

Harry and Bess returned home from the White House in 1953. Margaret chose to move on to New York City, and the Trumans found themselves alone in Independence. Mr. Truman wrote, “The house seemed big and too empty.” With just the two of them, maintaining traditions seemed more difficult than it had in the past. “As you get older,” Mr. Truman said, “you get tired of doing the same things over and over again, so you think Christmas has changed. It hasn’t. It’s you who has changed.”

In 1957, though, Harry and Bess’s holiday traditions were revitalized when they spent Christmas with young Clifton Truman Daniel, their first grandson, who quickly became the center of holiday attention. Three more grandsons followed over the next several years. Later, Mr. Truman was asked which Christmas had been his favorite. He replied, “I’ve had so many good ones and never a bad one. They’ve been more enjoyable, though, since the grandchildren came.”

Winter Celebrations for Us All

Whatever winter celebrations we embrace—Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Diwali, Soval, Pongal, Las Posadas, etc.—our traditions bind us together, and the symbols of the celebrations can sustain us over the course of our lives. As Harry Truman said as he lit the National Christmas Tree from his home in Independence in 1948, “The Christmas tree which we have just lighted in the South Grounds of the White House back in Washington symbolizes the family life of the Nation.

There are no ties like family ties. That is why I have made the journey back to Independence to celebrate this Christmas Day among the familiar scenes and associations of my old hometown.” He told his listening audience, “I wish you all a Merry Christmas.”



Winter view of the Truman Home. *NPS Photo*