

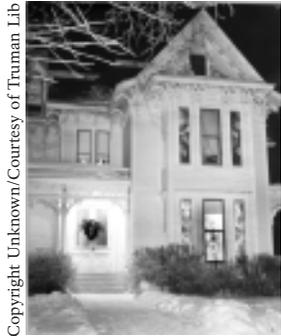


A Truman Christmas



NPS Photo

Introduction



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“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.” This was three year old Harry Truman’s first Christmas remembrance and it occurred in 1888 on his grandparents’ farm in Grandview, Missouri. The home has been the setting for over 100 Christmas celebrations. George Porterfield Gates, Bess Wallace Truman’s grandfather, built the house in 1867. Bess moved into her grandparents’ home in 1904 with her mother and three younger brothers. They spent nearly every Christmas holiday at 219 North Delaware for the remainder of their lives. In 1919 when Harry Truman married Bess Wallace he spent the first of many memorable Christmas holidays with the Wallace family.

1927 Christmas



Courtesy of Truman Library

Mary Margaret Truman and Felix

Harry and Bess Truman’s only child, Mary Margaret, was born in the home in 1924. The 1927 Christmas was the first Margaret remembered. That year the Truman and Wallace families pooled their money and purchased an elaborate dresser set (comb, mirror, etc.) for May Wallace, Bess Truman’s sister-in-law. Margaret, only three years old, wanted to give her Aunt May a piece of the set. Harry and Bess agreed that Margaret would give May a nail file. Margaret was supposed to keep this a secret, but she had a compulsion to

tell. One day Margaret told May she had a present for her and confessed that she was going to give May a “file nail.” As a result of Margaret’s honesty, May was successful in figuring out her Christmas gift that year.

Traditions



Living Room at 219 North Delaware

“From the earliest memory, for me Christmas has been a season of sugar and spice and everything nice and myself on tiptoe with excitement.” These were Margaret’s words as she fondly recalled Christmas at 219 North Delaware.

Outside the Truman home, a cedar wreath adorned the front door. Inside, the Truman family placed a live tree in the living room bay window between the colored glass windows. Margaret decorated the tree with ornaments passed down from generation to generation. On Christmas mornings the family would gather around the tree and open their gifts. As was the custom, each person had a chair to place their gifts in after they were opened. When this gift exchange was complete the family ate in the dining room.

Margaret recalled the Christmas dinners prepared by Vietta Garr, the family cook, “...The smell of cinnamon and cedar and spruce and the waxy smell of burning candles; the thirty-pound turkey, brown and smoking from Vietta’s oven; the fruit cakes and 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...”

Presidential Christmas

Presidential duties limited Mr. Truman's visits to Independence, except during the holidays. From 1945 to 1952, Mr. Truman spent only two Christmases away from home. He would usually arrive in Independence a few days before the holiday and if possible, spend several days with his family before returning to Washington.

He dearly loved to return to his old familiar neighborhood. In 1948, from the living room of 219 North Delaware, he addressed the nation by radio on the occasion of the lighting of the National Christmas tree on the White House grounds. Truman said, "I have come out here to Independence with my family to celebrate the great home festival. For all the days of the year Christmas is the family day."

He continued, "As I came up the street in the gathering dusk, I saw a hundred commonplace things that are hallowed

to me on the Christmas Eve—hallowed because of their associations with the sanctuary of home." The President described the lighted windows of his neighbors and the decorated trees in them. It was a comfort to him and his family to be home—away at least for a moment from their official duties in Washington.



Lighting the National Christmas Tree

Credit to Galloway Studios/Courtesy of Truman Library

A Special Christmas

When Margaret Truman married E. Clifton Daniel in 1956 the Christmas traditions went through a transformation. Margaret was no longer available to decorate the tree and the Trumans instead of spending the holidays in Independence, traveled to New York to be with the Daniel family. The Daniel family reciprocated, spending several Christmases with the Trumans in Independence.

One Christmas Clifton Truman Daniel, the oldest grandson, wanted a band uniform complete with a double breasted jacket, the piping down the pants and a plumed hat. This would not be an easy gift to find. Grandfather Truman searched for the uniform, but he had to substitute a Marine sergeant's dress uniform instead. Clifton came downstairs Christmas morning anxiously wondering what his gifts would be. As he came down the steps he saw

the Marine uniform hanging on the living room wall next to Christmas tree. Years later he remarked, "I was ecstatic and wore it constantly—except that my parents drew the line at wearing it to school."

It was one of the most cherished holidays Clifton and his grandfather experienced. In a 1965 interview, Mr. Truman was asked what his favorite Christmas was. He replied, "I've had so many good ones and never a bad one. They've been more enjoyable, though, since the grandchildren came."



Clifton Truman Daniel

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MORE INFORMATION

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