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American Christmases: Firsthand Accounts of Holiday Happenings from Early Days to Modern Times

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From Captain John Smith's description of his visit to a native village in 1608 to Major Carrie Acree's letter from Iraq in 2004, American Christmases offers firsthand impressions of the Christmas season as told in letters, journals, memoirs, newspaper articles, poems, songs, and advertisements.

Passages from well-known people include Daniel Boone describing his Christmas as an Indian captive in 1769; George Washington begging for congressional assistance for his starving Continental Army troops at Christmas in 1777; F. W. Woolworth conveying how he guessed wrong about the popularity of German Christmas tree ornaments; Helen Keller experiencing her first Christmas with teacher Anne Sullivan in 1887; Edith Wharton writing about a 1905 Christmas party at George Vanderbilt's North Carolina estate; and Secret Service agent Edmund Starling telling about President Woodrow Wilson's secret Christmas honeymoon.

However, some of the most moving entries come from ordinary people. Kate Cumming of Mobile, Alabama, writes of the Christmas she spent in 1862 with the Confederate Army of Tennessee's medical service. Hinda Satt, whose Jewish family emigrated from Poland, describes her first Christmas party at Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago. Inez McDonald, who served with the Army Nurse Corps, tells of a treasured handmade Christmas card she kept during her imprisonment in a Bataan internment camp in 1943. Father Paul O'Connor, a Jesuit missionary in Alaska, remembers a special Christmas gift he gave to an "Eskimo lass of ten" in 1945. Army Specialist Don Odom describes a surreal experience in the Saudi Arabian desert during Operation Desert Storm at Christmas in 1990.

By reading these 250 entries, you'll see how the role of Santa Claus has changed through the centuries, how the Christmas tree became a symbol of the season, and how America's celebration of Christmas has evolved over 400 years.

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