

News From:



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New book *American Christmases* collects stories of holidays past

John Smith, spending Christmas 1608 in the Kecoughtan village, could not have imagined the same holiday celebrated with tinsel trees, television specials, and billions of dollars in retail sales. William Bradford and Increase Mather in colonial Massachusetts railed against any holiday celebrations, so they would probably be apoplectic if they saw Christmas today.

Though the festivities and traditions surrounding Christmas have changed, the emotions evoked by the holiday have usually been tied to home and family. These memories, along with the comings and goings of Christmas customs, are collected in the new book *American Christmases: Firsthand Accounts of Holiday Happenings from Early Days to Modern Times*.

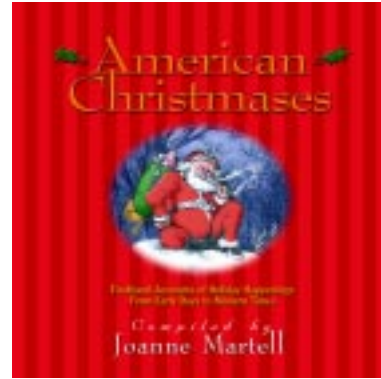
“Beautiful things are written at Christmas,” said Joanne Martell, who compiled the collection. “People are so open to memories, and thinking about people who aren’t there.”

Martell got the idea for *American Christmases* when she participated in a Christmas program near her home in Southern Pines, North Carolina, by reading poems and reminiscences of the holidays. She included 250 entries in the book, from Smith’s in 1608 to Major Carrie Acree’s, written in Iraq in 2004.

“A lot of them are explorers who are out in the wild, and a lot of them are soldiers,” Martell said. “A lot of them are immigrants. They’re separated, at Christmastime, from home.”

George Washington, Daniel Boone, Frederick Douglass, Edith Wharton, and Helen Keller share their Christmas experiences in this book, but Martell says her favorite story is that of Hinda Satt, a young Jewish immigrant in Chicago in the late 1800s. Satt “went to Hull House in great fear about going to a Christmas party” but to her surprise was received warmly. “It was so striking for her,” Martell said. “She realized that maybe things were going to be different here in America.”

Martell said that the way Americans celebrate Christmas began to change in the late 19th century. Before then, if Christmas was observed at all, it was with simple religious ceremonies or with a “rule of misrule” that saw



servants taking the place of masters for a day and rowdy young men rioting in the streets. The Civil War darkened the national mood, and Gilded Age prosperity brought commercialism to Christmas.

“Christmas did change a lot. You see how it changed just by reading the entries in chronological order,” Martell said. “I don’t like the sentimentality of Christmas, and that’s why I like the real Christmases where people went through every type of emotion. It’s American Christmas, still.”

About the Compiler: Joanne Martell and her husband are the shuffleboard champions of Southern Pines, N.C. A native of Ohio, she also grew up in northern California. At Stanford University, she majored in international relations and Spanish, a course of study that usually led to the diplomatic corps or the foreign service but led Martell to a year teaching in Ecuador. After returning to the United States, she helped research a series of weekend adventure guides for Union Oil, raised three children, and later became a court reporter. She is the author of *Millie-Christine: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, a biography of conjoined twins born into slavery who became international singing sensations.

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

Compiled by: Joanne Martell

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