

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHEAT

MONDAY, December 25, 1933.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

SUBJECT: "Christmas in Other Times and Other Lands." Information approved by the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

--oo00co--

When I came down to the studio this morning I was reminded of an old song from "Poor Robin's Almanack" --

"Observe how the chimneys
Do smook all about,
The cooks are providing
For dinner no doubt."

For Christmas dinner -- no doubt about that. Just as they have been from the earliest days, the cooks are providing for Christmas dinner. The turkey's in the oven, and all's well.

I've been reading stories lately of the old days in Wakefield, Virginia, when George Washington was a boy. Christmas was a great event, I can assure you. In preparation for the big day, the men folks cut great piles of wood which were hauled by oxen. On Christmas Eve they brought in the great hickory log, which had been soaked in the creek, to make it last longer.

And such preparations as were made for the holiday dinners! For days there had been baking, and months before that, jelly-making and pickle-making. There were black walnuts and brandied peaches; fruit cake and plum pudding, prepared long before and put away to grow mellow and rich. There were hams from the smoke house, and of course, roast turkey.

After breakfast on Christmas day, everybody went to church. Yes -- just about this time, I imagine, the Washingtons and their relatives and friends were getting ready for church. How pretty the church must have been -- decorated with holly and cedar, and crowsfoot and scarlet berries from the neighboring swamps.

It was a cold ride home from church. So cold that the ladies used heated soapstones to keep their feet warm. I can almost see the ladies of young George Washington's time, dressed in satins and brocades and velvets, coming home from church, the Washingtons, the Carters, and the Lees from Stratford and Chantilly.

And what a Christmas dinner was waiting their return!

According to old records, the feast included oysters from Monroe's Creek, fish from the Potomac, wild ducks and fried chicken, hominy and sweet potatoes and salsify, and turnips and mashed potatoes, and I don't know how many more vegetables. And there was the huge turkey gobbler, crisp and brown, fairly bursting with savory dressing. The boar's head was brought in on a gleaming

round platter, accompanied by servants who carried candles.

At one end of the table was the great plum pudding. At the other end, smoking-hot mince pies. Lining each side of the table were cranberry tarts, lemon puddings, and amber-colored jelly, "shaking with Christmas joy." And sillabubs.

If you own an ancient cookbook, you may have a recipe for that frothy dessert known as "sillabub." Somebody described it once as "mere froth; the little end of nothing, whittled down."

Besides sillabub, there was delicious pound cake. When the cloth was removed, the wines were brought on; and oranges from Spain; raisins and prunes and olives; old English cheese, almonds and walnuts.

After dinner, old Uncle Tom was ready with his fiddle, and it was "on with the dance" -- cotillions and jigs and the Virginia reel. (Or was it called the Roger de Coverley in those days?)

I'm sure they must have had a wonderful time down there in Virginia -- as they still do on Christmas day.

If we could take a quick turn around the globe this morning, we'd find people celebrating Christmas in practically every country in the world. To most of us Christmas means sparkling cold weather, snow and ice and tinkling sleigh bells. But there are places, in South America and in the mission stations of Africa, where Christmas is celebrated in the hottest weather. That wouldn't seem quite right to those of us who associate Christmas with a jolly Santa Claus who must wrap up well to keep warm. The old gentleman wouldn't be the same, in a white linen suit and a sun helmet.

Let's pretend we are traveling around the world this morning -- just to compare a few other Christmas customs with our own. In the South of Europe, St. Nicholas travels over the country on the night before Christmas, leaving all the things that children want most. In France, the good old saint is known as Father Christmas, or Pere Noel. In Holland, Germany, and England, as in our own country, he is known as Santa Claus. The Norwegian Santa Claus is so busy that he must have a helper, Kris Kringle, who drives a big sleigh drawn by reindeer. In Germany, Santa Claus is preceded on his journey by Knecht Rupert. In Russia, Babuska, "the old grandmother," brings the gifts at Christmas time.

Do you know why the children in our own country hang their stockings on Christmas Eve? Because, so I've heard, many years ago St. Nicholas came to the home of a very poor family. The good saint dropped a purse of money down the chimney. And the purse most certainly would have been burned in the fire, if it had not dropped into a stocking, hung up to dry.

Instead of hanging their stockings, little children in France and Germany place their wooden shoes on the hearth. In Switzerland and Spain, the children leave their shoes on the door step. No matter where the shoes are left, Santa always finds them, and they're always filled with gifts and goodies.

Somebody asked me the other day which is the oldest Christmas dessert. I couldn't answer that question. I know that mince pie is very old. I know that plum pudding is also very old. The King of England has a plum pudding every Christmas, made from a recipe two hundred years old -- the King's Empire Recipe, I believe it's called. But probably he has mince pie, too, and fruit cake.

I have a weakness for plum pudding, myself. Like Leigh Hunt, I relish the sound of the words -- plum pudding.

"What a word is that!" said Leigh Hunt. "How plump and plump again! How round and repeated and plenipotential! There are two p's, observe, in plenipotential; and so there are in plum pudding. Why, the whole round cheek of universal childhood is in the idea of plum pudding; ay, and the weight of manhood, and the plenitude of the majesty of city domes. Observe a little boy at Christmas dinner, and his grandfather opposite him. What a world of secret similarity there is between them! How hope in one and retrospection in the other and appetite in both meet over the same ground of pudding, and understand it to a nicety."

Little boys and grandfathers, little girls and grandmothers -- there's not much difference in age, on Christmas day.

Tomorrow: Questions and Answers.

