

Good Day to all, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and Happy Holidays! Did you know the first record of Christmas celebrated locally can be found in Jarvis Howard's journal? Howard arrived from New York with his wife Brenda and their three children in January 1874, along with his brother Frederick and family. Their intent was to homestead land on the Peace River's south bank in the area which became the Solana community. Although Jarvis' journal has no mention of Thanksgiving, his description of Christmas preparations is lengthy.

Writing the evening of December 24, 1876, after dark, he notes stockings for the children, each with popcorn tied in a pink bag, an orange, and molasses cake. He also references his sojourn earlier that evening seeking Christmas dinner.

Just beyond their cow pens, he began "jumping" deer. Within a half mile walk, he'd seen 13 but with the wind behind him, hadn't gotten a shot. However, he had also spotted four Whooping Cranes that had settled in a shallow pond not far away. After two shots from about 60 yards, he happily had one for the holiday table. Particularly so, since brother Fred returned from his hunt having seen nothing. Although he called them "whoopers," the birds might actually have been Sandhill Cranes.

Christmas morning, five-year-old Freddy and three-year-old Phillip were delighted with a toy two-mast schooner, and red and white rowboat respectively, along with the stuffed stockings. Apparently, the youngest, still an infant, was happy with just his stocking's contents. Then meal preparation began, with Christmas dinner served at 3 pm.

The bird, skinned and baked, weighed only eight pounds, but was declared to be better than wild turkey, which personally, I must say, is pretty good, and proclaimed the "A No.1 bird of Florida." A clue it might actually, again, have been a "Sandhill." It's good smoked too. Had some in the frig, but it was from Montana where there is still a season!

In addition, there was a centerpiece of 12 oranges in a large glass bowl, sweet potatoes, onion beets, carrots, and white potatoes, along with a bottle of St. Julian Claret, a red Bordeaux wine. With no cranberries, Brenda stewed prickly pear cactus. For dessert, they enjoyed pies made from "Indian pumpkins", likely Calabaza (West Indian pumpkin). Teresa and I had some growing on a trellis, "Seminole pumpkins".

They were also fancily dressed. Jarvis and brother Fred wore boiled and starched shirts, collars, and cuffs, along with coats, their wives, new bonnets and dresses. A bit surprising today since, although Christmas, the temperature was 85 degrees with a breeze from the southwest, much warmer than what's expected this year with a "high" projected in the upper 50s! Amazing what one can comfortably endure when not accustomed to air conditioning.

Sixteen years later, in November 1892, school teacher Sarah Elizabeth Morton is at Cleveland's one room Huckeby schoolhouse just northeast of Punta Gorda thinking of the upcoming holiday. Concerned that only a handful of her students had ever seen a Christmas tree, she'd written a letter to an aunt in New York requesting a pound each of popcorn and dry cranberries.

With the package arriving just in time, the Friday before Christmas Sarah set about showing her students how to make popcorn over an open fire, which they then strung into long garlands with the cranberries. Soon, the older boys returned with a nice tree, my guess a Sandhill Pine because we get one every year, which was decorated by all. With Christmas coming on Sunday, just like this year, she invited her students to return that evening after dinner with their parents.

When the time came, Sarah returned to the schoolhouse with her father and young son. As darkness fell, she was apprehensive when no one had come. However, it wasn't long before lanterns appeared on the dirt trail and the school was filled to overflowing. Standing near the tree in the light of coal oil lamps, she read the story of Jesus' birth from scripture and explained how the evergreen tree signified everlasting life.

Everyone then sang a few familiar carols and a Bishop Gray, coincidentally in town organizing a drive to build Punta Gorda's first Episcopal church, offered benediction. Miss Sarah taught at the school for just one year and it was demolished a few years later, but I'm sure it is a year many remembered for a long time.

Years later, during the Great Depression, when he was a young boy in Charlotte Harbor on the river's north bank, Chester Roberts' family was experiencing a particularly hard year. They lived at the end of Seneca Avenue and not expecting anything for Christmas, he was delighted to see his favorite uncle, Sam, strolling up the dirt street. The bag in his hand contained only candy, apples, and popcorn, but Chester recalled it meant the world to him and his family. Think about it, Merry Christmas!

Check out History Services' "Telling Your Stories: History in the Parks" project. It began in January 2021 with placement of the first interpretive sign "Charlotte Harbor Spa" at South County Regional Park. The last was dedicated December 15, 2021 at Centennial Park featuring Florida postcards. All dedicated signs can be viewed at online library resources. Select "Programs and Services", then "History Services" and "Virtual Programs". Visit the same site and select "History Exhibits", or phone 941-629-7278, to find out what history related programs and videos are available.

“Did You Know” appears, typically, every other Wednesday, courtesy of The Daily Sun and the Charlotte County Historical Society. The Society’s mission is to help promote and preserve Charlotte County’s rich history. We are also always looking for volunteers and interested individuals to serve as board members. If you believe our area’s history is as important as we do, please visit Charlotte County Historical Center Society on-line, or call 941.769-1270, for more information.

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