

AN AMERICAN CHRISTMAS

by Christine Ferguson



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

For the Photographs:

Mother

Father

Uncle Henry

Children

(Any number, but at least four)

For the Program:

Narrator

Mother

Father

Uncle Henry

Child #1

Child #2

Child #3

Child #4

PowerPoint Projector Operator

PRODUCTION NOTES

This program performance requires a PowerPoint projector and the advance preparation of digital photos, which are to be projected on a screen or wall behind the Narrator during the presentation. The photos depict American Christmas celebrations at different times in our history. Only the Narrator is seen On-stage during the performance; the other speaking parts are done in a voiceover effect. No memorization is required.

Costumes, Sets, and Props: For the photographs, four different sets are required, as well as four different costume changes.

Puritan photos: Setting is a colonial-looking living room with five chairs and a fireplace. (A small Sunday school room and a cardboard fireplace may be substituted.) Props needed are a cooking pot and a wooden spoon. MOTHER and the girls wear long skirts and bonnets. MOTHER wears an apron. FATHER, UNCLE HENRY, and the boys wear plain shirts with vests; FATHER and UNCLE HENRY each wear a flowing tie. Pulling long socks up to the knee over their pants can simulate knickers.

1800s photos: Setting is an old-fashioned living room. (Again, a Sunday school room may be substituted.) Props needed are a small, real-looking Christmas tree; a large sack; a scarf; a bag of nuts; woolen socks; an apple; and a book. MOTHER and the girls wear long skirts. The girls wear big bows in their hair. The boys, FATHER, and UNCLE HENRY wear plain pants and plain shirts with a soft, bow-like tie. FATHER and UNCLE HENRY wear suit jackets.

'50s Photos: Setting is a modern living room with a door and a window. Props needed are the same Christmas tree from the 1800s photos, a recording of "Jingle Bell Rock" or another Christmas song from the fifties, gaudy plastic ornaments, shiny tinsel, and a casserole dish. MOTHER wears a knee-length dress. The girls wear poodle skirts or rolled-up dungarees with bobby socks; they wear their hair in ponytails. The boys wear plaid shirts and jeans. FATHER has his hair slicked back and wears a white shirt with a skinny tie. UNCLE HENRY wears a Hawaiian shirt.

Contemporary Photos: Setting is a present-day living room. MOTHER wears a business suit. FATHER, UNCLE HENRY, and the CHILDREN are dressed in present-day attire. Props needed are a briefcase and the same Christmas tree as above (although the ornaments may be changed to modern ones).

PHOTOGRAPH DESCRIPTIONS

The following photos may be taken weeks, or even months, in advance of the performance.

Puritan Era

PURITAN PHOTO #1: FATHER and MOTHER stand by the fireplace. MOTHER stirs a pot over the fire. The CHILDREN and UNCLE HENRY sit in chairs around the fireplace. UNCLE HENRY is asleep.

PURITAN PHOTO #2: Close-up of FATHER and MOTHER smiling and talking.

PURITAN PHOTO #3: Wider shot of the whole FAMILY, with one of the smaller CHILDREN looking puzzled.

PURITAN PHOTO #4: Same as above, but MOTHER points at sleeping UNCLE HENRY.

PURITAN PHOTO #5: Close-up of a CHILD waking UNCLE HENRY. UNCLE HENRY looks startled.

PURITAN PHOTO #6: Same CHILD as above with UNCLE HENRY. UNCLE HENRY sits with one hand on his knee and the other hand raised as if telling a story.

PURITAN PHOTO #7: Close-up of MOTHER and UNCLE HENRY. MOTHER looks shocked, with hands on her cheeks. UNCLE HENRY looks embarrassed.

PURITAN PHOTO #8: CHILDREN and UNCLE HENRY join hands as if they're moving in a circle.

PURITAN PHOTO #9: The entire family holds hands and forms a line, pantomiming singing. (This photo is not shown until the end of the presentation.)

1800s

1800S PHOTO #1: MOTHER and UNCLE HENRY are seated,

and a CHILD excitedly talks to them.

1800S PHOTO #2: Close-up of MOTHER and UNCLE HENRY talking. UNCLE HENRY smiles; MOTHER looks dubious.

1800S PHOTO #3: FATHER and the rest of the CHILDREN enter the room. FATHER carries a Christmas tree. The CHILDREN appear to be excited.

1800S PHOTO #4: MOTHER stands to inspect the tree. The CHILDREN and UNCLE HENRY are gathered around. FATHER points to the tree.

1800S PHOTO #5: Another view of the family around the Christmas tree. UNCLE HENRY has one hand on his hip, the other hand pointing to the tree.

1800S PHOTO #6: Close-up of FATHER and MOTHER. MOTHER has her hands spread. FATHER holds up a sack full of gifts.

1800S PHOTO #7: CHILDREN are sitting around the tree. Each holds up the gift he has received: a scarf, a bag of nuts, woolen socks, and an apple. (More or less gifts may be shown, depending upon the number of CHILDREN.)

1800S PHOTO #8: UNCLE HENRY holds up a book.

1800s PHOTO #9: The entire family holds hands and forms a line, pantomiming singing. (This photo is not shown until the end of the presentation.)

1950s

'50S PHOTOS #1, #2, #3, #4: Various views of the '50s FAMILY decorating the tree with gaudy ornaments and shiny tinsel.

'50S PHOTO #5: FAMILY steps back to admire the tree. Two of the CHILDREN look disappointed.

'50S PHOTO #6: One of the GIRLS strikes a “beauty queen” pose. FATHER points toward the window.

'50S PHOTO #7: The CHILDREN look out the window.

'50S PHOTO #8: One of the CHILDREN opens the door. UNCLE HENRY stands outside, carrying a casserole dish.

'50S PHOTO #9: UNCLE HENRY hands the casserole dish to MOTHER. The CHILDREN peer into the dish with disgusted looks.

'50S PHOTO #10: FATHER and MOTHER talk to the CHILDREN.

'50S PHOTO #11: Close-up of UNCLE HENRY wagging his finger.

'50S PHOTO #12: Family gathers in a circle, on their knees, in prayer.

'50s PHOTO #13: The entire family holds hands and forms a line, pantomiming singing. (This photo is not shown until the end of the presentation.)

Contemporary Era

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #1: CHILDREN are seated. MOTHER enters the room carrying a briefcase.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #2: MOTHER is seated with the CHILDREN. She takes papers out of her briefcase. Two of the CHILDREN talk to each other.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #3: Close-up of two of the CHILDREN having a serious conversation.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #4: MOTHER wags her finger. The CHILDREN look puzzled.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #5: FATHER and UNCLE HENRY enter the room carrying a Christmas tree. FATHER looks sheepish; UNCLE HENRY looks exasperated.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #6: UNCLE HENRY has his hands in the air. One of the CHILDREN has her hands over her ears, and MOTHER stands with her hands on her hips.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #7: Close-up of FATHER, MOTHER, and UNCLE HENRY in a serious conversation.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #8: One of the CHILDREN stands and tells a tale. UNCLE HENRY is seated, with his head in his hands.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #9: UNCLE HENRY still sits, but the rest of the family is standing around FATHER, who is gesturing excitedly.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #10: FATHER, MOTHER, UNCLE HENRY, and CHILDREN form a line, holding hands. They are singing.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTO #11: The entire family waves good-bye.

THE PRESENTATION

(The POWERPOINT OPERATOR projects the proper photos at the places indicated on the script. The NARRATOR is the only person On-stage during the presentation; the rest of the speaking parts are done Off-stage.)

NARRATOR: Christmas and its traditions are an important part of American culture. Preparations for this much-loved holiday start weeks before December twenty-fifth, and it's difficult to imagine the month of December without it. For Christians, the reason for the season is, of course, the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But in America today, Christmas is celebrated not only as a religious holy day, but also as a secular holiday. Lights and tinsel, food and family, cards and gifts, a jolly Santa, and a red-nosed reindeer would seem to have nothing to do with the birth of the babe in Bethlehem; but still, it's fun and festive, and as long as we remember the reason for the celebration, there's nothing wrong with the way we Americans celebrate Christmas. Or ... is there? You may be surprised to learn that what we think of as a traditional American Christmas wasn't always so traditional. *(Puritan Photo #1 is projected.)* Let's step back in time to colonial America. Let's visit a typical Boston family in the late 1600s to see what a Puritan Christmas was like. *(Puritan Photo #2 is projected.)*

FATHER: Ah! Thee is certainly a fine cook, wife! The smell of thy codfish stew hath set my mouth to watering!

MOTHER: Yes, the Lord hath been good to us in providing such bounty. But it is not as fine a meal as others might be having on this Christmas day.

FATHER: Why speak ye of Christmas, woman? Thou knowest that we are Puritans! *(Puritan Photo #3 is projected.)*

CHILD #1: *(A younger CHILD)* Father, why do we Puritans

1 not celebrate Christmas?
 2 **FATHER:** Bah! 'Tis a popish holiday, child! Such reveling
 3 and commotion is unseemly.
 4 **CHILD #2:** Doth thou not know, sister, that Christmas
 5 celebrations are illegal here in Massachusetts?
 6 **CHILD #3:** Thee is right! Anyone caught observing
 7 Christmas by drinking, partying, or singing will be
 8 fined five shillings!
 9 **CHILD #1:** But why? Why is it wrong to celebrate the birth
 10 of the Lord?
 11 **MOTHER:** 'Tis not wrong to remember the Lord's birth,
 12 child. But 'twas in old England that the day became an
 13 excuse for bad behavior. *(Puritan Photo #4 is projected.)*
 14 Asketh Uncle Henry. He is old; he remembereth the
 15 olden days. *(Puritan Photo #5 is projected.)*
 16 **CHILD #4:** Uncle Henry! Uncle Henry! Wake up!
 17 **UNCLE HENRY:** *(Startled)* The redcoats are coming! The
 18 redcoats are coming! Oh. Well, lass, what dost thou
 19 want? *(Puritan Photo #6 is projected.)*
 20 **CHILD #4:** Please tell us about Christmas in old England,
 21 Uncle.
 22 **UNCLE HENRY:** Christmas! A bad business! Nothing but a
 23 rowdy, drunken street carnival. 'Twas not safe to be
 24 out and about during the season. Such cavorting! Such
 25 drinking of rum! Why, men would actually exchange
 26 clothes with women and parade about ... *(Puritan Photo*
 27 *#7 is projected.)*
 28 **MOTHER:** *(Shocked)* Uncle Henry!
 29 **UNCLE HENRY:** *(Clears his throat.)* Well, thou need not know
 30 all the details. Suffice it to say that Christmas was no
 31 holy day, and no time for children. Moreover, why
 32 would we want to carry on the traditions of those who
 33 did persecute us? Come, children, let's say the rhyme I
 34 taught you. *(Puritan Photo #8 is projected.)*
 35

1 CHILDREN and UNCLE HENRY: (*Together*)

2 Christmas is coming,

3 The geese are getting fat.

4 Please put a penny in the old man's hat.

5 If you have no penny,

6 A halfpenny will do;

7 If you have no halfpenny,

8 Then God bless you.

9 NARRATOR: Remembering all the excesses of the
10 Christmas season in old England, it's easy to
11 understand why the Puritans frowned on this rowdy
12 affair. But as more settlers from other parts of the
13 world came to America, they brought their Christmas
14 traditions with them, and slowly these cultures and
15 traditions became a part of the American landscape. It
16 wasn't until the 1800s that Christmas was celebrated
17 widely in America, and in 1870, December twenty-fifth
18 was declared a national holiday. At about this time,
19 Christmas became more of a family-centered
20 celebration, and the favorite holiday of children. (*1800s*
21 *Photo #1 is projected.*) Let's go to an American home in
22 the 1800s and see how they celebrated.

23 CHILD #1: Mother! Uncle Henry! You'll never guess what
24 Papa is doing!

25 MOTHER: Tell me, then! What is Papa up to now?

26 CHILD#1: He's chopping down an evergreen tree — and
27 he's going to bring it into the house! (*1800s Photo #2 is*
28 *projected.*)

29 UNCLE HENRY: Ah, yes! A Christmas tree! It's all the rage.
30 I was just reading how Prince Albert surprised Queen
31 Victoria by bringing a live tree into the palace. He's
32 German, you know!

33 MOTHER: German or not, I don't know if I like this idea!
34 (*1800s Photo #3 is projected.*)

35 FATHER: Our very first Christmas tree! I plan to make this

- 1 a family tradition! Every year we'll chop down a new
2 tree and bring it into the house!
- 3 **CHILDREN:** Hooray! Hooray! *(1800s Photo #4 is projected.)*
- 4 **MOTHER:** But won't we soon run out of trees?
- 5 **CHILD #2:** Don't worry, Mother, we'll plant new ones!
- 6 **CHILD #3:** And besides, isn't it beautiful?
- 7 **FATHER:** It will be even more beautiful when we put
8 candles on it! It will light up like, well, like a Christmas
9 tree!
- 10 **MOTHER:** Wait, now! Before we put any candles on that
11 thing, make sure there's a bucket of water nearby!
12 *(1800s Photo #5 is projected.)*
- 13 **CHILD #4:** Can we put decorations on the tree?
- 14 **CHILD #3:** I think we should put some candy on it!
- 15 **CHILD #2:** I've heard that people decorate them with cakes,
16 fruits, and nuts.
- 17 **UNCLE HENRY:** Before you know it, F.W. Woolworth will
18 start selling ready-made decorations in his stores!
19 *(1800s Photo #6 is projected.)*
- 20 **MOTHER:** *(Sighing)* Christmas used to be so simple. But I
21 suppose we must keep up with modern times.
- 22 **FATHER:** What's wrong with having a little fun? We're
23 celebrating the birth of Christ! It's a joyous occasion.
24 And what could be more joyful than presents?
- 25 **CHILD #2:** A Christmas tree *and* presents! This *is* a happy
26 Christmas! *(1800s Photo #7 is projected.)*
- 27 **CHILD #1:** A scarf! Thank you!
- 28 **CHILD #2:** A bag of nuts! Wow!
- 29 **CHILD #3:** Warm stockings! I can use these!
- 30 **CHILD #4:** An apple! Just what I've always wanted!
- 31 **MOTHER:** I hope you children won't be spoiled by such a
32 wealth of gifts. *(1800s Photo #8 is projected.)*
- 33 **UNCLE HENRY:** There's yet another gift! It's a new story by
34 Clement Moore. I'll read it to you, and then we'll all go
35 for a sleigh ride! "Twas the night before Christmas, and

1 all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not
2 even a mouse ... ”

3 NARRATOR: Yes, by the mid-1800s, many of our Christmas
4 traditions were beginning to take shape. Santa Claus
5 was already on the scene, the sending of Christmas
6 cards was becoming popular, and caroling was
7 practiced more and more as new Christmas carols were
8 added to the songbooks. Sensing an opportunity to
9 increase business, enterprising merchants advertised
10 their goods with the Christmas gift-giver in mind. Santa
11 Claus impersonators appeared on street corners and in
12 stores, urging Americans to buy gifts. One Indiana
13 newspaper editor commented on the increasing
14 frivolity and commercialization of the season,
15 wondering if this was the proper way to celebrate the
16 birth of Christ. He further noted that it was probably
17 already too late to change things, as the customs had
18 already taken hold. The year was 1855.

19 Fast-forward to the year 1955. If our ancestors from
20 the 1850s could see an American Christmas in the
21 1950s, they wouldn't believe their eyes! (*A recording of*
22 *“Jingle Bell Rock” or another fifties Christmas tune plays as*
23 *'50s Photos #1 #2, #3, and #4 are shown. After the song*
24 *finishes, '50s Photo #5 is projected.*)

25 MOTHER: Isn't our tree beautiful this year?

26 CHILD #2: It's OK, Mom, but green trees are really
27 squaresville. I wish we had a silver aluminum one!

28 CHILD #3: I betcha Elvis has a cool aluminum tree. He's the
29 most! (*'50s Photo #6 is projected.*)

30 CHILD #4: Wonder what kind of tree Marilyn Monroe has?
31 It's probably pink and full of diamonds!

32 FATHER: Now, children, our tree is perfectly fine. And how
33 do you like the string of lights I put up outside along
34 the porch roof? Take a look! (*'50s Photo #7 is projected.*)

35 CHILD #1: I like it, Dad! It's neat-o!



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