

Ocracoke Christmases in the twenty-first century are a combination of traditional and modern elements.

Each season sees an increase in lighted decorations. Some folks, especially down the Bank Road, go all out with colored lights mounted on fences, wrapped around trees, lining driveways, and outlining roofs.

Commercially grown trees are now imported and sold at the Variety Store. Santa Claus comes to visit at a children's holiday party at the Community Center, in the local grocery store, and even at the Methodist & Assembly of God churches. Christmas carols are played in the few stores and shops that are open this time of year.

Years ago, of course, there was no electricity on the island. A family here and there might put a candle in the front window, but other than that and maybe a hand-made wreath decorating a porch or two there was little outdoors to remind folks of the upcoming holiday.

The Homer & Aliph Howard Home, with locally made cedar wreath, 2004:



Most islanders would put up and decorate a local cedar, one they cut wherever they found an appropriately shaped and sized tree. And wherever they knew the landowner would not object.

Times were often hard, and money scarce. Local general merchandise stores would stock toys and other gifts for Christmas giving, but generally children were fortunate to receive even one significant toy — maybe a doll or a store-bought ball.

My father remembered hanging up a stocking one Christmas Eve when he was a young boy, and discovering the next morning a fresh orange down in the toe. He was so delighted with his one Christmas present from Santa that he played with it for days, rolling it back and forth on the floor with his brothers and sisters. Eventually he cut it up and savored the juicy fruit, a rare treat on the island nearly a hundred years ago.

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The United States, along with other predominantly Protestant countries, was slow in adopting the calendar reforms proposed by Pope Gregory in 1582. In fact Great Britain and the American colonies continued to follow the older Julian calendar for nearly 200 more years, not adopting the Gregorian calendar until 1752.

Many communities and individuals refused to acknowledge the reforms even then, although 11 days had been eliminated by the British Parliament in order to realign the old calendar with the solar year.

The "Old Style" reckoning continued in practice in many places along the Outer Banks, particularly in the Hatteras Island village of Rodanthe, where Old Christmas is still celebrated with a community pot luck and the late-night appearance of "Old Buck," a carryover from old England.

Old Christmas now falls on January 07 (on the Gregorian calendar) because the Julian year is 11 minutes and 14 seconds longer than the actual solar year, a difference that increases the gap year after year and now accounts for a 13 day discrepancy between the two calendars.

On Ocracoke the last native folks to keep Old Christmas were members of the Styron family. It has been more than fifty years since they refused to acknowledge the modern Christmas, but even today the Frum-Lovejoy family celebrates both holidays on the island. Nowadays the January date is recognized by them as a celebration of the visit of the Magi.

Some islanders have added an even more ancient mid-winter festival to our holiday activities. The winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, occurs because of the tilt of our planet's axis. In the winter the earth is tilted away from the sun, causing the sun to rise later in the morning, remain closer to the horizon, and set earlier in the evening.

Ancient cultures, unaware of the cause of the changing seasons, waited anxiously as the days grew shorter, then rejoiced as they realized that yet again the sun began to climb higher in the sky. The solstice had passed, and spring, with its longer days and warmer weather, would greet the tribe once again.

Perhaps it is because Ocracoke remains closely connected with the weather and the seasons that we are keenly aware of natural cycles.

So nowadays, Ocracoke will have Christmas programs at the local churches, a live nativity scene in front of the Methodist church, a wassail party at the Preservation museum, visits

from Santa Claus, pot lucks and mid-winter parties (especially the community-wide get-together at Jimmy's Garage on December 11 where hundreds of islanders will gather to celebrate, eat, drink, dance, and be merry), as well as gatherings of family and friends to celebrate their religious heritage and the cycle of the natural world.

From all of us at Village Craftsmen we extend our warmest wishes to you for the merriest and happiest December holiday, whether Christmas, Chanukah, or Winter Solstice; and for peace in the New Year.