In 46 BC, Julius Caesar decreed that the Roman world should adopt his new calendar. Based on the solar year, rather than lunar cycles, it was superior to previous calendars. Unfortunately, the new calendar which defined a year as 365 ¼ days, was approximately 11 minutes longer than the solar year. By the 16th century, a discrepancy of ten days between the calendar and the solar cycle meant that church festivals were falling farther and farther from their appropriate seasons.

In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII decreed that all Catholic nations must adopt a new calendar of 365 days with a provision for leap years, the one in wide use today. It mandated deleting 10 days between October 4 and 15 in order to realign the calendar with the solar cycle. England, wary of anything papist, refused to change until 1772 when England and her colonies finally switched to the Gregorian calendar. By then the Julian calendar was eleven days out of sync with the seasons.

Many people on the Outer Banks, either because the message was slow to reach them, or because they refused to conform, continued to celebrate Christmas according to the Julian calendar, which was January 5 on the Gregorian calendar. The village of Rodanthe on Hatteras Island has kept the tradition of Old Christmas even into the 21st century. Today, Old Christmas in Rodanthe, a time of festivities and merriment, is generally celebrated on the first Saturday after Epiphany (or on Epiphany, which in 2018 falls on Saturday, January 6).

The following article by Virginia Midgett, reprinted from the Fall, 1979 journal, *Sea Chest*, a project of the students of Cape Hatteras School, is an interview with John and Pat Herbert of Rodanthe in which they tell how Old buck became an Outer Banks legend. More information about Old Christmas in Rodanthe is available here: http://www.outerbanksblue.com/blog/rodanthe-old-christmas-older-rodanthe/.

Old Buck in Rodanthe at Old Christmas Photo: Outer Banks History Center

The Story of Old Christmas

by Virginia Midgett

For many years on January 5, Old Christmas has been celebrated at the community building in Rodanthe. People in the three villages of Rodanthe, Waves, and Salvo get together in the earlier part of the day and shoot for bushels of oysters. Later on the partying begins and everyone then goes to the community building, which used to be the old schoolhouse, to listen and dance to the band and eat oysters. The oyster roast takes place outside of the building.

One event that everyone really looks forward to seeing at Old Christmas is 'Old Buck,' a bull that comes trampling through the building. Actually 'Old Buck' is not real – there are two men who walk underneath him. "John Herbert, an eighty-one year old native of Rodanthe, has been the keeper and leader of 'Old Buck' since he was appointed an honorary member of Old Christmas by the grandfather of his wife, the late Nora Midgett Herbert, forty-five years ago," said Pat Herbert. John Herbert says about the only difference in Old Christmas today and what it used to be when he was a boy was that people used to go around from house to house disguised. "People would come from Waves and Salvo up here to Rodanthe

then we'd all go from here to there disguised with old stockings and clothes. The women would dress up as men and the men as women. Ben Payne, Mrs. Pat Herbert's grandfather, would beat the drum and John Thomas would play the fife.

"Old Buck belonged to Nora's (John Herbert's first wife's) grandfather, Ben Payne, who got him from his grandfather seventy-five to eighty years ago. Ben Payne had a boy named Bradford Payne who took it over after him. There were two or three houses up here in Rodanthe that had porches on 'em. Uncle John Allen and Uncle Ben Pugh, the boys and girls, would go to these houses and do what they called just playing around but it was square dancing. Boy, did they dance! We had all kinds of plays back then, but the main event on Old Christmas would take place at 2 o'clock of a day. The crowd would all gather up to the lifeboat station to watch John Thomas Payne, who was a member of the old lifesaving station, and Captain Ben Midgett, the officer in charge at the time. Thomas Payne would take six apples and put one at a time on his head and Captain Ben Midgett would shoot it off his heat with a .22 rifle. After this event, Ben Payne would take an old pole and put a cow's head on it and everyone would go through the villages. That's been eighty years ago or over, so when he died, Bradford Payne, Ben Payne's son, took it up.

"When Bradford Payne got older and didn't want to go around with it, he wanted John Herbert to take it and keep it in the family. That's been fifty years ago. So he took it and after that he and Fred O'Neal kept Old Christmas going with 'Old Buck' for a long time until Fred gave it up. But John Herbert kept it up and still does. Now the main event in Old Christmas is the oyster roast and square dancing."

Pat Herbert added that Old Christmas is not celebrated as a religious occasion. "It is a time for the people to get together and make merriment." When she was a little girl, her father, Urias Williams, who was a member of the lifesaving station, told her that on January 5, Old Christmas day, after everyone marched in disguise through the villages "they'd then gather on the beach to watch the weird action of the cattle as they would fall on their knees at midnight and make low murmuring noises as if they were praying. The people believed this was the proper time to celebrate because the animals played an important part in the nativity. After the cattle dispersed and returned to the grassland, the folk would begin their journey home stopping at several different houses for hot coffee and cold sweet tater pie. Also to dance to the tune of 'Shu-La-Lu, my darling' and many old songs played on an old phonograph.

"'Old Buck' became renowned many years later. There was a severe storm off Cape Hatteras for several days and it's believed that a ship loaded with cattle sank, and a black and white bull, the only survivor, swam ashore to the beach in Rodanthe. A man from

Chicamacomico Life Saving Station was on watch duty in the tower when he saw the beautiful animal standing on the bank. Excitedly he ran to the station to tell the other men. After closely observing the animal, each man went home and turned their cows out of pasture. The strange animal soon became acquainted with the cows and had a field day, siring many calves. Thereafter he became domesticated and was loved and respected by the natives. Each year on Jan. 5 he was led through the villages. Sometimes children would ride on his back. That's when he became known as 'Old Buck' and became part of the Old Christmas celebration.

"Several decades later 'Old Buck' became restless and trekked off in Trent woods looking for greener grass. There he was shot and killed by a hunter and became a legend. The natives of Rodanthe were saddened but not outdone. They made a replica of 'Old Buck' out of a steer's head including horns and attached it to a wooden frame. A blanket was thrown over the frame to cover two men who provided legs and ambulation for the cavorting 'Old Buck' as he makes his appearance at the community building each year"