

Christmas Letters from the Civil War

Long before there were phones and voice mail, or email and the internet, people wrote letters to share information. When Christmas came in December 1861, many soldiers wrote home letters detailing how they spent the holiday away from their families. Reading excerpts from soldier's letters, Dave Davenport, a Civil War re-enactor and Vice President of the Hackettstown Historical Society provided members with



some insight on how these brave men were faring far away from their homes and loved ones.

The Confederate soldiers had been very successful in many of the small battles and skirmishes they were involved in during the first six months of the war, and in the winter of 1861, morale was still high. Their letters still reflected some of that enthusiastic optimism in support of their cause and lifestyle. For the common soldier, the war, in the beginning, was an adventure, but as the days and months wore on, the day to day duties became repetitive and tedious, especially at Christmas. Robert Gould Shaw wrote to his mother in Massachusetts about the monotony of guard duty from camp in Fredericksburg, Maryland.

The boredom and dullness of Christmas in the army was a common lament among soldiers in their letters. Many wrote about being homesick as the novelty of the "adventure" began to wane.

General Robert E. Lee penned a Christmas letter to his daughter, filled with parental advice, reminding her to restrict her wants to only necessities. In a separate letter to his wife Mary, Lee spoke of his appreciation for their Christmases past.

Everything was not doom and gloom that Christmas. Entertainment also abounded in the camps. Charles M. Scott sent a letter to his wife Amy, describing how the regiment would be having fun, not drilling, on Christmas day. Events included a greased pig chase, and jumping and footrace competitions for prize money. James M. Williams wrote to his wife of how he had enjoyed two glasses of eggnog before breakfast.

Drunkenness was a disruptive problem amongst the common soldiers on a daily basis, and with the anticipation of eggnog, complete with whiskey for Christmas, it was nearly epidemic. Food and whiskey were often requested in letters, and delivery express boxes from home were always a welcomed sight.

Nearly 150 years after that first Civil War Christmas, there are once again American soldiers away from their families for the holidays, writing letters home. If you know one, send them a box of holiday cheer. If you don't, simply send your warm thoughts for the season and a safe return home.

Happy holidays and best wishes for the new year from the Hackettstown Historical Society