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A Conversation with Nancy Smith Thomas

Author of *Moravian Christmas in the South*

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Q: Who are the Moravians, and how did they come to live in the South?

A: The Moravians are one of the earliest Protestant groups. They originated in Prague in 1415 with a Catholic priest named John Huss. In 1735, the Brethren came to Savannah, Georgia, but after finding strife between the English and the Spanish, they moved to Pennsylvania where they successfully established the towns of Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Lititz. Offered the opportunity to acquire land in North Carolina, in 1753 the Moravians purchased almost 100,000 acres in the Piedmont wilderness. They called the area Wachovia because its rolling hills and fertile fields reminded them of the countryside around the Wach River in Austria. (Wachovia Bank was founded in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and chose its name to reflect the Moravian roots of its clientele.) The town of Salem, founded in 1766, was the Moravians' central trades town in Wachovia. In 1913 the town of Salem merged with the nearby town of Winston to form the city of Winston-Salem. A small denomination today in the mainstream of the Protestant religion, the Moravian Church has about 800,000 members worldwide. Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania remain the governing centers of the church in America.

Q: When did they introduce their version of the Christmas holiday in the United States?

A: The Moravians brought their unique and charming customs with them when they came to the New World. They were responsible for lots of Christmas firsts in America. Christmas traditions embraced by the German-speaking people of northern Europe were recorded in Moravian towns of Pennsylvania as early as 1745. These traditions included a liberal use of hymns and music, as well as decorations that incorporated festoons of greenery and services of fellowship, such as the lovefeast. The lovefeast is a Moravian gathering of fellowship that includes music and usually some simple foods. The earliest record in America of giving Christmas gifts to children can be found in 1745 in the Moravian town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. And the first positively verified Christmas tree in the South was erected at the Moravian's Springplace Indian Mission in Georgia on 21 December 1805.

Q: Do you have a favorite Moravian Christmas custom?

A: I love all the Moravian Christmas customs, so it is very hard to pick just one. It would probably be the *Putz*. The *Putz* is a decoration that has evolved over time. Early on, the Moravian *Putz* was a decoration focused on the nativity scene, including figures of the Holy Family, the magi, shepherds, and animals surrounded by greenery. As time passed, the *Putz* evolved to include detailed miniature village scenes with abundant landscape accessories. At the *Putz*'s peak in popularity, Moravians would visit their neighbors' homes to view one another's *Putz*, in the process creating a friendly competition to see who could make the most elaborate or most realistic miniature scenes of their homes or town. Today, visitors of the Candle Tea in Salem, sponsored by Home Moravian Church, can see an amazing *Putz* of the town of Salem that includes a working water wheel at the mill and realistic footprints and wagon trails in the snow left by the tiny denizens of this beautiful Christmas village.

Q: Did the Moravians establish the Christmas holiday in other parts of the country besides the South?

A: Wherever Moravians settled it seems their non-Moravian neighbors enjoyed and sometimes borrowed their traditions. For example, when the Georgia Cherokees were forced to relocate to Oklahoma in the late 1830s, some individuals carried their memories of Moravian Christmases at the missions with them and continued to celebrate as they did at the Moravian's Springplace Indian Mission in Georgia. In 1851 Salemites Edwin Senseman and his wife Louisa Vogler were called by the church to serve in Illinois, where their Moravian Christmas traditions, including local recipes, were transplanted.

Q: What was the role of children in a Moravian Christmas?

A: Including infants and children as an integral part of the Moravian Christmas celebration meant that they would carry on the traditions as the next generation. Participation by children included the exhilarating excursions to the woods to gather greenery, moss, and small trees, and often continued with the decorating of the church. Young people helped in the dipping of candles, the baking of Christmas cakes, the gathering of apples, the chopping of wood, the preparation of meals, and the butchering of hogs. They memorized hymns and Bible verses relating to Christ's birth and enjoyed the *Putz*. Lighting candles to represent Christ as the light of the world, reading the story of the miracle of His birth, singing hymns to inspire and bond, and eating and drinking together in fellowship at the lovefeasts all gave young people many sensory points of reference to strengthen their faith.

Q: What types of gifts did children receive?

A: In the early years children were given candles, nicely printed and embellished Bible verses, spicy cakes, apples, and useful items of clothing as well as colored ribbons and neckerchiefs. Small religious books and tracts, handmade hornbooks, Bibles, and additional edible treats such as dried fruits, sugar candy, and nuts were also gifts. The nineteenth century was well under way before toys became a common as Christmas presents. The first documented toy given as a Christmas present in Salem, North Carolina was a peep show in 1831. This was an optical toy and the forerunner of the toy theater.

However, the toys from Nuremberg, Germany were available in a Salem shop in 1804, and the local potters were making what were listed as toys in 1804. By the latter part of the nineteenth century *The St. Nicholas Magazine* was a great favorite among the children of Salem as were popular juvenile books on a variety of topics.

Q: What is the significance of the Moravian star?

A: A brochure prepared by the Moravian Church gives the meaning of the star as follows: “The rays of the star symbolize (1) the greatness of God who made the universe, (2) the star which led the wise men to the Christ Child, and (3) the Divine Star, Christ Himself.” It is an interesting note that the star’s design originated as a geometry exercise for Moravian students.

Q: What are some traditional Moravian Christmas foods which still exist today?

A: Some foods which represent the Moravian Christmas are ginger “cakes”—which are actually cookies—sweet buns that are served during lovefeasts, and a distinctive but very tasty sugar cake.

Q: What facets of Moravian daily life were combined into their Christmas holiday? How was it different than other days?

A: If you reverted to the original meaning of holiday as holy day, then you would be closer to the traditional Moravian Christmas, which focused on celebrating the birth of Christ. On Christmas Day, the music for the church service would have been more carefully selected, prepared, and practiced. A Christmas lovefeast would have been a treat for both adults and children. As the nineteenth century progressed, people often attended the presentation of the Girls School’s nativity-based religious plays, called dialogues, and Sunday School plays, which were not part of daily life. Also, the Moravians increasingly enjoyed the custom of visiting the neighbors to enjoy one another’s *Putz* decorations.

Q: What part did the community play in a Moravian Christmas?

A: In traditional Moravian towns like Salem, the community *was* the congregation of the church, as only members of the church could live there. However, on occasion there were visitors from outside the community who might be traveling and staying at the tavern. At Christmas, visitors might be invited to participate in a lovefeast at the church but most likely would have spent the remainder of the day at the Tavern.

Q: Why do you think that Moravian Christmas traditions have endured?

A: The Moravians Christmas traditions have endured because many of them were incorporated into secular American Christmas celebrations. In the eighteenth century most Americans celebrated the holiday with more “adult” activities such as shooting matches, cockfights, and balls and parties. As progressive Americans looked to bring more family-friendly traditions to the holiday they found excellent examples in the Moravian Christmas. In addition, the Moravian traditions endure because they engage the senses, speak to the heart, and evoke feelings of warmth and friendship for all. The

beloved symbols and meaningful traditions epitomize the hold that the celebration of Christmas continues to have on the hearts of members and visitors alike.

Q: What aspects of the Moravian Christmas might we adopt to make our modern day holiday more joyful and meaningful? How do Winston-Salem and Old Salem Museums and Gardens incorporate the traditions?

A: Many other communities have followed the lead of numerous groups and individuals in North Carolina who have created joyful occasions based on Moravian traditions. Many Protestant churches have developed their own Moravian-inspired gatherings, including the lovefeast. Moravian traditions such as the chamber music concert, the Christmas star, the beeswax candles, and the *Putz* have also been incorporated by churches across the state. In 1959 the city of Winston-Salem began to use the Moravian star as the downtown Christmas decoration on the light posts. The Baptist Hospital / Wake Forest University Medical Center at Christmas raises an enormous star which hovers over the city in a gesture of goodwill, and many people hang the star both outside and inside their homes. Smaller versions of the star are used for Christmas ornaments, and origami-folded ones are adapted for jewelry and decorations. Various Moravian symbols adorn many family Christmas trees, and those same symbols are placed on Advent wreaths.

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