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Celebrations! Holidays Make the Richest Memories

◀ *Holidays bring greetings from friends far and near. Mass-market greeting cards have been produced since the mid-nineteenth century. Postcards first appeared in the 1890s and have been helping us keep in touch at special seasons ever since.*

Holidays are place-markers in our lives, both as individuals and as societies. They mark the passage of the years, and provide continuity for cultures through time. They bind new nations together in shared festivities, and provide families with a sense of traditions passed down from generation to generation.

Still, we often make assumptions about how holidays were marked (or not) in times past. Fortunately, there are thousands of resources to draw on to help us get a true picture. To begin with, novels, poetry, and music celebrating holidays reflect the practices of their times. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is probably the classic example of an English Christmas celebration. The contrast between the celebrations of each social class which Dickens describes not only serve to open Scrooge's eyes, they also document that society for us. Closer to home, many readers are familiar with the opening passage of *Little Women* which highlights a nineteenth century American Christmas, notable to the characters because it differs from their usual practice, thanks to the changes brought by the Civil War. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books describe holidays on the frontier.

A more traditional research resource for information about holiday customs are periodicals and magazines published throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the narratives and poetry included provide a sense of how people felt about the holidays, it is the recipes of foods to prepare, instructions for decorating, or articles suggesting holiday games and activities that give researchers a glimpse of how people in times past celebrated. Periodicals aimed specifically at women and families are the richest source for this kind of domestic information. Issues of *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* and the *Ladies Home Journal* are just two of the typical titles that are available online through library catalogs.

Most revealing of all are the letters and diaries of people recording their daily and special activities, many of which can be found in the manuscripts of the Center for Archival Collections. Holidays often provided time away from usual chores that allowed everyone to catch up on their correspondence or journal entries, and the highlights of family and community celebrations were often recorded. Researchers interested in investigating holidays of the past can find a wealth of material by searching through the collections listed in the [Family Bibliography](#) on the CAC website. A search through wartime correspondence will reveal not only the special circumstances of servicemen's holidays, but also uncover family traditions as they were shared across distances. Look through [The U. S. in Wartime Bibliography](#) to identify these manuscript collections.

In our [Gallery](#), we will briefly look at four holidays as they were recorded in some of these manuscript collections. Two all-American holidays, Independence Day and Thanksgiving were unique to this country and served to establish a common national identity. Meanwhile, secular celebrations of Christmas and New Year's brought European customs to this country and adapted them to the new land.

Learning about our holiday traditions links us in a very real way with our past and brings to life our nation's history.

--Lee N. McLaird