

Islanders remember traditions of Christmas past

By Holly Benton

Community, faith and family – these simple heartfelt values were once the very definition of Christmas in Jamestown.

During the 1930s and 1940s, a sense of community played an essential role in Jamestown, bringing to life the spirit of the holiday. Each December, the “Share Your Food” campaign, sponsored by the American Legion, asked the public to contribute non-perishable items each week until Christmas.

Donations were placed in barrels throughout the community. The food was then gathered into baskets and distributed to those in need on Christmas Eve. Similar baskets were created and donated by community groups such as the Elks, the Salvation Army and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The celebration of Christmas in Jamestown’s schools is a treasured memory for many older Jamestown residents. Islander Victor Richardson remembers his kindergarten and first-grade Christmases.

“The teacher passed out slips of paper, and we all wrote our names on them,” he said. “Then, we put them in a basket and she shook it up and passed it back out. The one whose name you got, you had to bring a present in for that person.”

Community events have always been an important part of Jamestown’s holiday celebration. They included the Christmas Novelty Dance sponsored by the town’s Athletic Association and the annual Christmas party for Jamestown’s children, which was put on by the Arnold-Zweir Post of the American Legion. Other traditions included a yearly holiday dance for the young people of Jamestown and more recently, the Christmas Eve pageant on Shoreby Hill, which began in 1975.

A highlight of the season was the yearly celebration that began in 1930, at the height of the Great Depression. Walter Marley, a fireman and custodian at the firehouse, suggested a Christmas party for the island’s children, which grew to be the greatly anticipated annual “fire station Christmas celebration.” Held at the Jamestown fire station and sponsored by the town’s volunteer fire department, the tradition brought enchanted smiles to the faces of children each year. Small gifts, such as oranges, apples, pencils and candy, were given by Santa, who sat by a tree illuminated with hundreds of colored lights and a huge white star.

Richardson remembers the celebration fondly.

“The one thing I remember most is the fire station Christmas party,” he said. “It was always the big thing in Jamestown for me. My father was the assistant chief in the volunteer fire department.”

In addition to a true sense of community, a quiet faith



was displayed in town during each holiday season. From the soft lights that lit up the east waterfront to the illuminated Nativity scene at Memorial Square, islanders displayed symbols of their faith. A five-foot glowing star lit up the Naval radar facility, attracting people across the island. Churches held spiritual services, including midnight Masses.

Family also played an important role in the old-time Jamestown Christmas, with intimate traditional gatherings a significant part of the celebration.

Richardson reminisced about one of his favorite Christmas memories.

“Our family Christmases were mostly small,” he said. “We always had a Christmas tree with lights. I remember the lights always blowing out, continuously. We had real Christmas trees – we went out and cut our own. It wasn’t hard to find a tree to cut down, but they weren’t quite like what you get now, all finely cut.”

The simplicity of the season was also something to be treasured back then. Richardson remembers a neighbor of his in 1939.

“I was born in 1924, so I was growing up all through the Great Depression and it affected Christmas,” he said. “The neighbor next to me was an army sergeant. That Christmas, his boy gave him a present...I can’t remember what it was; not much, but it was something that he could afford. It’s too commercial now.”

With the U.S. recovering from the Great Depression and headed into WWII, money didn’t play a big role in the season.

When asked how Christmas has changed from the celebrations of 70 years ago, Jamestown resident Art Christman said, “It starts in July.”

Years ago, Christmas lights in the town were turned on no earlier than Dec. 15, he said.

While Christmas 70 years ago may not have been the commercial holiday that thrives today, Jamestown residents celebrated a season rich in love and tradition. 🎄