Number #5 Victorian Christmas Traditions

Do Not Write On This Paper

(It will be used in other class periods)

Source 1: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/victorianchristmas/history.shtml>

**History of Victorian Christmas**

It's hard to imagine now, but at the beginning of the 19th century Christmas was hardly celebrated. Many businesses did not even consider it a holiday. However by the end of the century it had become the biggest annual celebration and took on the form that we recognise today. The transformation happened quickly, and came from all sectors of society.

Many attribute the change to Queen Victoria, and it was her marriage to the German-born Prince Albert that introduced some of the most prominent aspects of Christmas. In 1848 the Illustrated London News published a drawing of the royal family celebrating around a decorated Christmas tree, a tradition that was reminiscent of Prince Albert's childhood in Germany. Soon every home in Britain had a tree bedecked with candles, sweets, fruit, homemade decorations and small gifts.

**Victorian Christmas Cards**

In 1843 Henry Cole commissioned an artist to design a card for Christmas. The illustration showed a group of people around a dinner table and a Christmas message. At one shilling each, these were pricey for ordinary Victorians and so were not immediately accessible. However the sentiment caught on and many children - Queen Victoria's included – were encouraged to make their own Christmas cards. In this age of industrialisation colour printing technology quickly became more advanced, causing the price of card production to drop significantly. Together with the introduction of the halfpenny postage rate, the Christmas card industry took off. By the 1880s the sending of cards had become hugely popular, creating a lucrative industry that produced 11.5 million cards in 1880 alone. The commercialisation of Christmas was well on its way.

**Food**

Another commercial Christmas industry was borne by Victorians in 1848 when a British confectioner, Tom Smith, invented a bold new way to sell sweets. Inspired by a trip to Paris where he saw bon bons – sugared almonds wrapped in twists of paper – he came up with the idea of the Christmas cracker: a simple package filled with sweets that snapped when pulled apart. The sweets were replaced by small gifts and paper hats in the late Victorian period, and remain in this form as an essential part of a modern Christmas.

Decorating the home at Christmas also became a more elaborate affair. The medieval tradition of using evergreens continued, however the style and placement of these decorations became more important. The old custom of simply decking walls and windows with sprigs and twigs was sniffed at. Uniformity, order and elegance were encouraged. There were instructions on how to make elaborate synthetic decorations for those residing in towns. In 1881 Cassell's Family Magazine gave strict directions to the lady of the house: "To bring about a general feeling of enjoyment, much depends on the surroundings… It is worth while to bestow some little trouble on the decoration of the rooms".

The Christmas feast has its roots from before the Middle Ages, but it's during the Victorian period that the dinner we now associate with Christmas began to take shape. Examination of early Victorian recipes shows that mince pies were initially made from meat, a tradition dating back to Tudor times. However, during the 19th century there was a revolution in the composition of this festive dish. Mixes without meat began to gain popularity within some of the higher echelons of society and became the mince pies we know today.

The roast turkey also has its beginnings in Victorian Britain. Previously other forms of roasted meat such as beef and goose were the centrepiece of the Christmas dinner. The turkey was added to this by the more wealthy sections of the community in the 19th century, but its perfect size for a middle class family gathering meant it became the dominant dish by the beginning of the 20th century.

Source 2: <http://primaryfacts.com/210/victorian-christmas-facts-and-information/>

**Victorian Christmas Presents and Gifts**

* At the beginning of the Victorian period families often gave and received presents to celebrate the New Year. But, as the importance of Christmas as a family celebration grew, the gift-giving was moved to Christmas.
* The first Victorian Christmas presents were fairly small – gifts such as fruits, nuts, sweets and handmade items were hung from the branches of the Christmas tree.
* The size and expense of the gifts steadily increased. Victorians started to buy gifts from shops and they were often too big to hang from the tree. By the end of the Victorian era, many families had taken to leaving Christmas gifts under the tree.

Other Facts About Christmas in Victorian Times

* The family was really important to the Victorians. They saw Christmas as a time to focus on family relationships, and most of the Victorian Christmas traditions (such as gift giving, eating a Christmas dinner, decorating the Christmas tree) were shared by all of the family members.
* Charles Dickens is also credited with spreading many of the Christmas traditions in Victorian times. His famous book, A Christmas Carol, was very popular and it influenced how Victorian families approached the celebration of Christmas.