

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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1732: First Christmas Celebration in Herrnhut

On Christmas Eve 1732, Christmas was celebrated in Herrnhut for the first time. Therefore this year marks 275 years of Moravian Christmases! Ever since 1732 Moravians have developed their own Christmas traditions, some of which are still honored today. Each generation has filled them with new meaning to celebrate the coming of the eternal light into our dark world.

During the first ten years of its founding in 1722 Christmas services were not held in Herrnhut. Because Herrnhut was part of the Lutheran parish of Berthelsdorf all church services had to take place in the official parish church; however, the people in Herrnhut did not always comply with this rule. In addition to the weekly church services in the Berthelsdorf Lutheran church they held a variety of meetings in Herrnhut: prayer meetings, *Singstunden*, and bible study. Christmas Eve celebrations were added to this list in 1732.

On Christmas Eve of that year a wedding was celebrated in Herrnhut. According to the congregational diary people gathered in the *Saal* after the wedding meal “to edify ourselves during the Christmas night with the singing of hymn stanzas, which lasted until midnight.” Although this first “Moravian” Christmas must have been a fairly informal event, it already had its distinctive character as a singing service.

The Christmas Eve services were truly vigils in the early years: they began at 10 or 11 o’clock in the evening, lasting for several hours, and included congregational singing as well as choir anthems. Usually a separate service for the children was held in the afternoon or early evening. The children’s services were memorable events for the children as well as for the adults who planned and prepared them. Burning candles were distributed to the children in Bethlehem for the first time in 1752, following an example set by Johannes von Watterville during a children’s lovefeast in Marienborn, Germany, in 1747 (also see *This Month in Moravian History*, Dec. 2006). The distribution of burning candles has become a central element of Moravian Christmas Eve celebrations; today not only the children but all individuals receive a candle.

An illuminated picture of Jesus in the manger was first

displayed in Herrnhut in 1750; in Bethlehem this happened a few years earlier, in 1748. In the Bethlehem diary of that year we find the following description:

“Early in the morning [of Christmas day 1748] the children had a sweet holiday joy. Their teachers had made several pyramids for them, decorated with lights, apples and songs about Christ’s wounds. They also painted an image showing the children bringing their greetings to the Christ child. Br. Johannes explained all this in a childlike manner while the children were having their lovefeast.”

The pyramids mentioned here are wooden structures onto which candles, greenery and other decorations could be attached; they were the predecessors of the modern Christmas tree.

The 1748 display can also be considered a precursor of the *Putz* and the Christmas decorations of the sanctuary. An early photographic image of such decoration in Bethlehem’s Central Moravian Church dates from 1884. Work on the decorations began on December 15th; according to the diary, services had to be moved to the Old Chapel on the Fourth Sunday of Advent because of the “very elaborate decoration in progress in the church.” Attendance on Christmas Eve was extraordinarily large that year: “The elaborate and beautiful decoration attracts many persons, not members of the Congregation, to the church. The best of order prevailed however, and on the whole, all passed off nicely.” Note on the photograph how the liturgist’s table was incorporated into the display! The minister led the Christmas services from behind this table.

