
THE HOPE AND OPTIMISM OF CHRISTMAS

By Monroe S. Miller

It's Christmas — my favorite holiday and the best time of the year. If given one wish to grant all mankind I would wish everyone to receive the same good feelings I experience during this holiday season. It is sad and unfortunate that for many — too many — the holiday season magnifies their sense of despair and depression. They feel bad news more keenly during this time, a time in which I feel more buoyant than at any other. I am the lucky one.

Maybe it is with good reason some suffer emotional strain now. We live in an age of too much senseless terrorism, atomic weapons and farm crises. I, too, feel frustration at the enormity of starving millions. The dark news of poverty that exists here at home as well as abroad wears heavily on my mind at times. And we all suffer from the bitter-sweet moments of life and its unfulfilled expectations, suffering that may be more intense at Christmastime.

Although we cannot ignore and must not forget the wrongs of the world, I think we should use this season to think of the better things, too. Our improving economy, over a decade of peace, and the matchless freedoms and abundance of America are all positive things. The season should be a very personal one, too: a period to express gratitude for a successful golf season; a time when we exchange gifts, which is fun. It is when we gather together with family and friends. We go to our churches. Christmas is a calming time, a time for resolving to do better and a time for renewed hope.

One of my favorite Christmas carols started as a poem, a poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. I've done a lot of reading of Longfellow's writing and some study of his life. He was a New Englander, like Robert Frost, and on our trips East, Cheryl and I have, in small ways, gotten close to him. The carol that I like so much is commonly known as "I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day", but it was written by Longfellow and simply called "Christmas Bells". The poem is significant to me because it tells so clearly what so many feel quite often. He was able to reconcile optimism and

despair; his words carry a magic feeling. He begins with three verses that express sentimental aspects of Christmas, but quickly turns to anger over war, the Civil War, in the fourth verse. The fifth and sixth verses are melancholy and despairing and he wonders if peaceful life is possible. Suddenly, in the last verse, he recaptures the hope and the optimism we all should feel, especially at Christmas.

The circumstances in Longfellow's life explain the feelings that show in the lines of these verses he wrote. He and his wife, Fanny Appleton Longfellow, had a perfect marriage, if there was one in an imperfect world. They made Christmas very special for their children each year. Gifts were carefully chosen and wrapped. They would write letters full of love and understanding to their kids from Santa Claus. Tragedy struck Longfellow in 1861 when his wife suffered a tragic death. Her passing was a great crisis in his life and he suffered terribly. Then, in December of 1863, his son Charles was severely wounded in the Civil War at the battle of Antefirm by an Enfield bullet which passed through both shoulders. Although he recovered, Charles required a very long convalescence.

Longfellow wrote this poem on Christmas Day, 1864. Robert Ferguson was with Longfellow that Christmas in Longfellow's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He remembered it this way: "He kept up the good old style. The yule log sparkled on the hearth; the plum pudding smoked on the board; with his prettiest offerings did the good Saint fill the stockings of the little girls by night; and all day long did the presents come pouring in to the children of a much-loved household, 'til the drawing-room table on the following morning looked like the stall of a fancy fair."

"Christmas Bells" was an assertion of faith by Longfellow in life and in God, despite the horrors of the conflict of the Civil War and the tragedies in his life. The deep meaning of this poem is as true in 1986 as it was on that Christmas in 1864.



CHRISTMAS BELLS

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Written December 25, 1864

I Heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

And thought how, as the day had
come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearthstones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail
With peace on earth, goodwill to men!"

Merry Christmas, Everybody!