

Five Pieces of Board from Crib Center of Christmas Eve Rites

Pilgrims returning home have long since made world-famous the impressive procession on Christmas Eve, when the relics of the Crib in which Our Lord rested in Bethlehem are carried in solemn procession and placed on the altar in the celebrated Basilica of St. Mary Major. The Crib remains at the main altar through the solemn High Mass sung at midnight.

Added to the ordinary pilgrims who had been in Rome at Christmas time, there are now in the United States thousands of younger girls—Catholics and non-Catholics—who have visited the great Basilica and seen where the Crib is preserved.

While it is generally held that the Crib itself is preserved at the Basilica, some authorities speak rather of the "relics of the Crib" because it is not actually a manger, that is preserved at St. Mary Major's.

The Catholic Encyclopedia speaks of "the remains of the Crib" being preserved in the Roman basilica. They are actually five pieces of board, which have been identified as having come from a species of the evergreen trees of which there are several varieties in the Holy Land.

It is held to be well established that there must have been six pieces of wood in the beginning, and that those now extant are somewhat shorter than they were originally. Two of the five pieces of wood preserved at St. Mary Major's originally stood upright in the shape of an X. The remaining three pieces rest against these two, and were supported by the sixth piece of wood which is now missing. Authorities conclude from these facts that the pieces of wood were in themselves the supports for the manger itself, which is believed to have been fashioned out of the soft limestone of which the cave at Bethlehem is formed.

It is generally believed that the Crib of Bethlehem was brought to Rome and maintained during the reign of Pope Theodosius (408-450). In any event, the Basilica has borne the name of Santa Maria ad Trastevere since the seventh century. However, some Catholic archeologists have held that there is no solid argument to support the contention that the Crib came to Rome before the twelfth century.

Margaret Allen Starr, a convert to Catholicism, is one of many who have written of the St. Mary Major Christmas ceremonies. In her book "Pilgrims and Shrines,"

precious marble. Thus it was kept for the admiration of Christian pilgrims, until the year 624, when the Mohammedans, by invading the Holy Land, endangered the existence of all relics and the Crib, with the relics of St. Jerome, was brought to Rome and deposited in this side chapel of Saint Mary Major. Here, at Midnight Mass on Christmas, the little Crib is placed where it can be venerated, enclosed not only in silver plates of Saint Helen, but in a case presented by Margaret of Austria, wife of Philip III of Spain; and this again enclosed in one of still greater richness, by the Duchess of Hermsdorf, representing Our Lord as an infant in a crib of enamel adorned with bas-reliefs in silver; but all three cases deriving their preciousness from the five small, time-worn boards within.



Children of the Catholic Mission at Mary, Kenya Colony, Africa, gather about a statue of the Christ Child, while one of their number, in the manner of the Wise Men, offers a gift—one of their native cowbells.

The Meaning of Want

The death of her husband having shifted to her shoulders the entire responsibility for the training of King Alfonso XIII of Spain, the Queen Mother sought to have him learn valuable lessons at an early age.

The Christmas Eve when he was but seven years old, Alfonso XIII put his little shoes on the sill outside his bedroom window. He is again the Three Kings of the Orient go about each Christmas putting gifts into every little shoe they find waiting for them. But that Christmas morning the little boy Alfonso found a note in his shoe instead of the usual gift. It was a note from his mother which read as follows:

"To our beloved son, His Most Catholic Majesty, King of Spain—
"You are expecting a present, a very fine, beautiful and splendid one, such as kings give to one another. But we have brought you no present, on purpose, because we want you to have a little disappointment this time. A king should learn what disappointment means, because he has sometimes to cause disappointment to others, and to make sure he does what they do not want to do. We must know how to feel to have that happen to them. They wait for us very much. But such children—
"When you are a man and have everything you want, you must never forget that there are many people in the world who have nothing at all; you must notice these sad and disagreeable things so as to prevent them whenever you can. Remember that there are a great many children who are always disappointed by having something told to them—
"I cannot have any presents from the Wise Men. They would have to put their shoes outside the windows of their rooms; but they haven't any rooms, any windows, or any shoes."

Magi Covered 1,200 Miles

The journey of the Magi, or Wise Men, was wonderful indeed! The trip they made was a far one—a very, very far one for the time in which they lived. This fact alone proves how deep was their desire to see the new born Saviour of all mankind.

The Bible tells us little of them, but students of the history of their times have learned much about them. Indeed, scholars of the subject are in substantial agreement about them and their journey.

Ecstebana, the summer capital of the Parthian Empire, which lay at the foot of Mount Orontes, is considered their most probable home. This city was in the Kingdom of the Medes, which was part of the vast Parthian domain. Mardadan is Ecstebana's name today and Mount Orontes is now called Kizwand.

The Wise Men were priests called Atravans, members of whose order had lived in the East centuries before Christ's birth. Zoroaster called the Magi to him and made them special witnesses of his teachings. They became increasingly influential and both Cyrus and Darius sought their advice.

The Magi must somehow have learned of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, hence their interest in the event that took place in Bethlehem 650 miles from Ecstebana, as the crow flies. The route they took was over mountains, and largely through desert country. They had to travel a distance of between 1,000 and 1,200 miles, with much of the way thickly infested by desert marauders. They traveled on horseback through Babilonia and Babylon, and then by camel through Damascus and down through Jericho to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, where showers of light from the Star halted them for their night of the Christ Child to whom they gave their gifts of the gold, frankincense and myrrh. The caravan route they took from Damascus was known as the Pilgrim's Way.

Far, far travelers indeed were those Wise Men but great was their reward.

Mistletoe Origin
Mistletoe as a symbol of Christmas cheer comes from an ancient custom of the pagan Druids, who used to hang branches of mistletoe on their sacred trees.

Figgs—(FIGS)—A golden chalice and patent gift of the Catholic League of Women in Portugal, was presented to Pope Pius XII.

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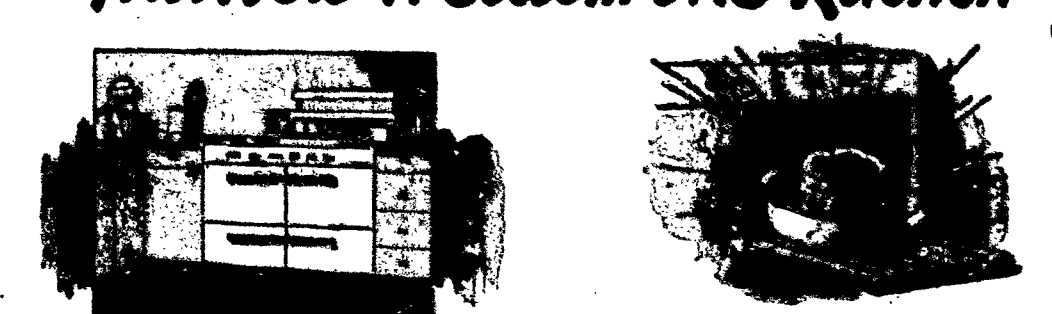
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