It’s that time of year again—

Christmas Party Time!

♦ When?—12/8/16—Lunch at 11:30 am (arrive early and bring decorations from home if you like) Bring your spouse or partner or ???.

♦ Where?—First United Methodist Church, corner of 6th and Main, enter under the carport. (location change from First Baptist)

♦ What?—Potluck Lunch, turkey and rolls (Susan and Tom) provided, Carol Singing, Dirty Santa (gifts $10 but can go to $20 if you are feeling flush!)

♦ Rose Ann will bring drinks (she did not specify what type!) Mark said if she brings water to read the label!

The Mythology and Folklore of Holly

During the holiday season, holly adorns houses all over the world. The prickly green plant and its red berries are a popular ornament for those looking to enliven their homes with a little Christmas spirit. But where did this tradition begin? Why do we deck our halls with boughs of holly foliage every December? What does holly represent in the celebration of Christmas?

Despite its association with the Christmas season, holly did not get its name from "holy." It is translated in Old English as holegn, with variations in Old Norse as hulfr, German as hulst, French as houx, and Welsh as celyn. The literal translation for all of these terms is "holly," but the origin is probably the Proto-Indo-European (the ancient root language of the Indo-European languages) base, qel, which appropriately means "prickly" or "to prick." Even in ancient times, people took advantage of the sharp ends of holly's leaves. The Druids hung it on windows and doorways to fend off evil witches and spirits [source: The Royal Forestry Association].

Holly is known for its vibrant red color, which stands out against the starkness of winter. But did you know that it’s also associated with males and is considered to bring men good luck and protection; the female counterpart to holly is ivy. A famous English Christmas carol, "The Holly and the Ivy," uses the holly symbol to celebrate the birth of Christ. One line
states that "The holly bears a berry/As red as any blood/And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ/To do poor sinners good." Another line says "The Holly bears a prickle/As sharp as any thorn/And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ/On Christmas Day in the morn" [source: The Hymns and Carols of Christmas].

Before holly was hung in houses to accompany Christmas trees, it was considered to be a sacred plant by the Druids. While other plants wilted in winter weather, holly remained green and strong, its berries a brightly colored red in the harshest of conditions.

The Druids regarded holly as a symbol of fertility and eternal life, thought to have magical powers. In Druid lore, cutting down a holly tree would bring bad luck. In contrast, hanging the plant in homes was believed to bring good luck and protection. Holly was also thought to protect homes against lightning strikes. Romans associated holly with Saturn, the god of agriculture and harvest, and decked the halls with its boughs during the festival of Saturnalia.

Early Christian calendars mark Christmas Eve as templar exornatur, meaning “churches are decked,” though supposedly Saturnalia celebrators didn’t allow some Christians to hang boughs in honor of Christmas. Christians adopted the holly tradition from Druid, Celtic and Roman traditions, and its symbolism changed to reflect Christian beliefs.

Today, Christians consider holly symbolic of Jesus Christ in two ways. The red berries represent the blood that Jesus shed on the cross on the day he was crucified. Legend states that holly berries were originally white, but that the blood Christ shed for the sins of humankind stained the berries forever red. A holly's pointed leaves symbolize the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head before he died on the cross.

Holly is known as christdorn in German, meaning "Christ thorn." Both of these symbols are meant to serve as a reminder to Christians of Jesus' suffering, but they aren't the only stories tying holly to Jesus. One claims that the cross on which Jesus was crucified was constructed of holly. Another says that holly sprang up from his footsteps. Less common symbolism includes the holly's white blossoms representing purity, and the idea that if the holly used to decorate a home for Christmas is prickly, the man will rule the house for the coming year; but if the holly used is smooth, the woman will rule.

Holly (Illex Aquifolium) is a shrub or tree found primarily in North America, Europe and Asia. With hundreds of species of the plant ranging from short shrubs (two meters high) to tall trees (up to forty meters high), it's known primarily for its bright crimson berries and prickly green leaves.

Hollies can be evergreen, meaning the plant’s glossy leaves are on the tree year-round, or deciduous, meaning the leaves fall off seasonally. Most hollies are evergreens that can thrive in the sunlight or the shade and benefit from well-drained soil. The leaves, characterized by a waxy texture and serrated edges, are dioecious, with male and female reproductive structures found on separate plants. Both male (staminate) and female (pistillate) hollies bloom in May or June, yielding white flowers. But only the females can produce berries. In order for this production to occur, a male plant must be near a female plant for the process of pollination to take place. Insects, like bees, help cross-pollinate female hollies, transferring pollen from the male to the female plants.

Like its holiday companion, mistletoe, a holly's berries are toxic to humans, resulting in nausea and severe stomachaches when ingested. Not so for some animals. Berries are a vital source of food for birds such as thrushes and blackbirds. Holly berries, which ripen in early winter, typically contain four seeds each. The birds that eat these seeds help scatter them for germination, the growth of new holly plants.

Although the scarlet berries are famously prominent in homes for the holiday season, they're not the only useful part of hollies. The berries are poisonous, but the green leaves have been used in herbal remedies for centuries for various medical conditions like dizziness, fever and hypertension, though there is little medical proof of the plant's effectiveness. Holly wood is hard and compact, making it excellent for carving; it's sometimes used to make chess pieces and walking sticks. And while the berries provide nourishment for birds, a holly's bark can be used to make a sticky substance called birdlime, used for trapping birds. Birdlime, which can be made by boiling holly bark for several hours, is illegal in many countries and viewed as inhumane. (See next page for credits)
Each year in December, the U.S. Postal Service places tidy, dense packages of certain baked goods into the mailboxes of citizens. But this parcel isn't relegated to the United States. In fact, in 2006, some 2,952 pounds of fruitcake -- a traditional Christmas treat -- were delivered to Iraq [source: Christian Science Monitor]. And with a shelf life of up to three years (even longer if generously doused with rum), it's easy to see why they're so mail-friendly. But what, exactly, is fruitcake?

Although there are many recipes, the main ingredients that constitute a proper fruitcake are flour, sugar, eggs, whiskey, brandy or rum, walnuts and nuts or dates. But it's the signature element -- fruit -- that merits mention. Some recipes call for candied fruit, as opposed to dried fruit. And the type of fruit tends to vary by region.

Fruitcake is a tradition that goes back to Roman times. It became a staple of festivals, and today is widely associated with the December holidays. There are some who are ardent about these fruit-filled loaves. And while fruitcake may not have a poem penned for it like another traditional food, haggis ("To a Haggis," by Robert Burns), it has been defended by many and continues to be baked, wrapped and delivered. In fact, Texas-based Collin Street Bakery, which has been providing fruitcakes since 1896, produces more than 1 million a year and ships to 200 countries [source: Texas Monthly].

Others are less than thrilled to receive what they see as heavy and inedible as a brick. After all, according to Harper's Index, the average fruitcake has a 1:1 density ratio with mahogany [source: Christian Science Monitor]. So why is fruitcake sought after by some and ridiculed by others?

In this article, we'll look at the history behind this fruit-studded loaf and we'll learn what makes it so weighty and impervious to molding, as well as how to "feed" your fruitcake. We'll also explore alternative uses for fruitcake, such as paperweight, doorstop or even projectile.

See www.howstuffworks.com/menus/fruitcake1.htm for more details!

Christmas Cookies!

You probably already know this, but if you don’t here’s a hint for easing into Xmas. Go online, type in 'ready to bake cookies' and presto you have a long list of cookie dough you can buy at the grocery—names like Hershey’s, Nestle, Pillsbury and more are at your service. The magazine “Cooks Illustrated” did a test and could find little to no difference between ‘made from scratch’ and store-bought! Check it out and go easy this Christmas!