

No Figgy Pudding at Fort Lawton, BUT...

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Jim Birchman's stop at an unseasonably cold Fort Lawton seven days before Christmas, as he was waiting to be shipped out immediately from the Fort after processing for debarkation, (this was the 3rd largest Post processing soldiers in and out, for and from duty on the West Coast) took an interesting turn. An enlistment with the Army in 1945 got Jim Birchman a two-year term of duty. The usual rigorous training in the deep south, in humid conditions, eventually made him eligible for transfer to the Pacific for a post-WWII assignment which he was at Fort Lawton to receive.

It was December 18, 1946. Birchman's paperwork was lost and not forthcoming, he had a little less than a year to go and by some stroke of luck, as he tells it, he was assigned to the Fort Lawton Station Hospital as a mail-carrier for the remainder of his military career. His five days of Fort Lawton's temporary housing in tar-paper shacks, "it was just like having to camp out", took a swift and great turn for the better. He was suddenly in hospital employee quarters with "showers, sheets and steam-heat." One of the next surprises was the appearance of a classy menu, scattered throughout the hospital. It was a menu announcing the traditional Christmas dinner.

The stiff festive menu was festooned with holly and candles and an inner paper announced the formal meal in entrees: tomato consommé, celery sticks, olives, and assorted pickles. Virginia baked ham and roast young turkey were announced as the main courses with oyster dressing, giblet gravy, and cranberry sauce. The side dishes were mashed potatoes, buttered peas, candied sweet potatoes, head lettuce salad, hot rolls and butter. Dessert was apple pie ala-mode, fruit cake, assorted candies, nuts, and fresh fruits.

Birchman remembers the meal with crisp clearness and with fondness. The tables were covered with white paper cloths and decorated with the holly and candles of the menu motif. Glasses of water sat at each place. He believes there were servers of the desserts and coffee. There "weren't any alcoholic spirits at all, but we were all spirited and happy to be there, to say the least." Over 300 hospital staff members were served that special Christmas repast that year and all soldiers still coming through recovering from war wounds waiting evaluations and assignments, or those sick with the likes of malaria or flu, or those waiting evaluations for discharge were served the same meal in their wards. "It was a nice time, we felt so lucky and special."

And, yes...according to Birchman and his photos..."it was a white Christmas."

To this day Birchman, a history buff himself, recalls his days at Fort Lawton with a special nostalgia, this particular memory with sweetness and still keeps the menu he mailed home to his Mom that year.

The menu appears in a photo on page 318 of "Magnolia: Making More Memories", published by the Magnolia Historical Society, 2007.