

Christmas, Roman festival share date

Religious leaders uncomfortable with the holiday's pagan roots

By ANNE PAINE
Staff Writer

Christmas comes but once a year, but why is it on Dec. 25?
There's no evidence that this was the birth date of Jesus Christ.
It appears that the day was chosen because of a highly popular pa-

gan Roman festival which celebrated the birth of the sun then.
That's about the time of the shortest day of the year, after which the "unconquerable" sun begins lighting the sky for a longer time each day.
People were bent on merrymak-

ing on that date so it must have seemed a convenient choice and perhaps a way to compete with the heathen worship.

The pagan roots of Christmas are strong, and the dancing, drinking and general revelry that went along with honoring Christ's birth on Dec. 25 were unsettling to many a Christian religious leader over the years.

The Protestants were particularly disturbed by the boisterous celebrations which didn't make any dif-

ference until the Puritans came to power in England. They acted on their convictions. In 1647, Christmas celebrations were declared illegal by English Parliament and shops were ordered to remain open on that day.

Some celebrated quietly in the secrecy of churches or their homes, according to *The Christmas Almanac* by Gerard and Patricia Del Re.

"For the common people, however, it provided a new form of Christ-

mas entertainment: the riot," the Del Res wrote.

There was fisticuffs in the lanes and shopkeepers who opened found their wares tossed into the streets.

But it's hard to keep a good holiday down.

Ten thousand men gathered at a spot in England and swore "if they could not have their Christmas day, they would have the King back on his throne again," the book says.

Monarchy again reigned in 1660



and Christmas became officially sanctioned.

In this country, the Puritans held sway a little longer. Christmas was banned in 1659 and it took 22 years before the ban was lifted.

In New England, a lid was still kept on the festivities until the middle of the 19th century when Christmas became a legally recognized holiday in 1856. ■

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