

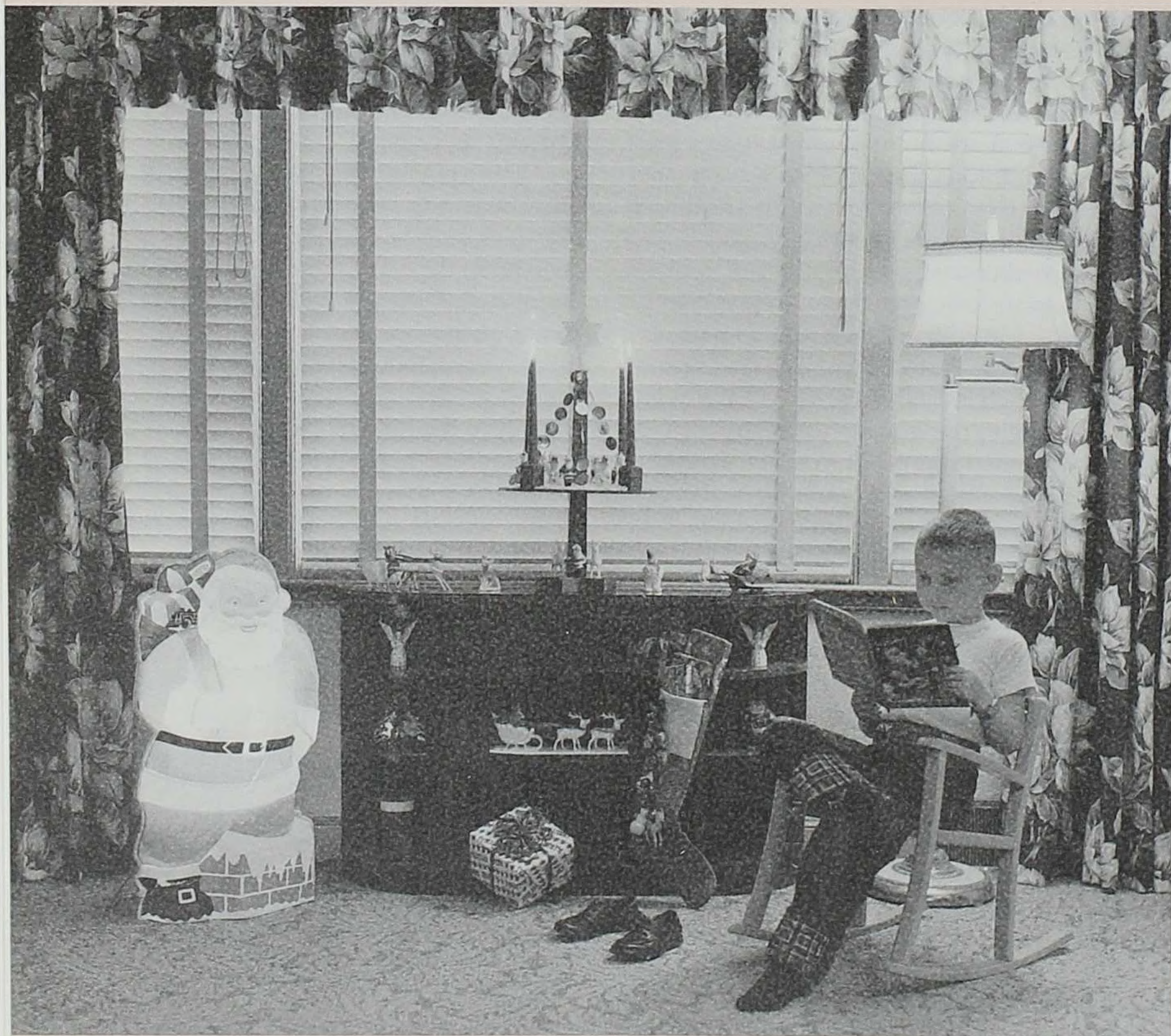
The Culture of Christmas

by Ginalie Swaim

"The things that are done at Christmas ... provide points of entry into a state of happiness and abundance that transcends the present and stretches back endlessly into the past." So writes Karal Ann Marling, one of several historians who have studied traditions and changes in America's most beloved holiday. The culture of Christmas engulfs most Americans, distinct from the Christian holiday's religious meaning and observance. Most of us expend our energies on our households and others closest to us, but the culture of Christmas also thrives in the public world of community and commerce.

Once soundly opposed by the Puritans, the Christmas holidays in the early 19th century were a time of rowdy, raucous, irreverent behavior in the streets that shocked and threatened more "respectable" Americans celebrating quietly in their homes. About the same time, author Washington Irving's descriptions of Christmas—or how he wished it were—entered and took hold of the American imagination. Irving's *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820) gave us the images that still appear on Christmas cards and in plays: shoppers dressed in fur-trimmed capes and top hats bustle along cobblestone streets; carolers under lamp posts lift their voices into the crisp air; a horse-drawn coach pulls up to a cozy country inn; inside, servants proudly carry the boar's head into a dining hall warmed by a blazing fire.

Irving drew upon his own "nostalgic longing for a



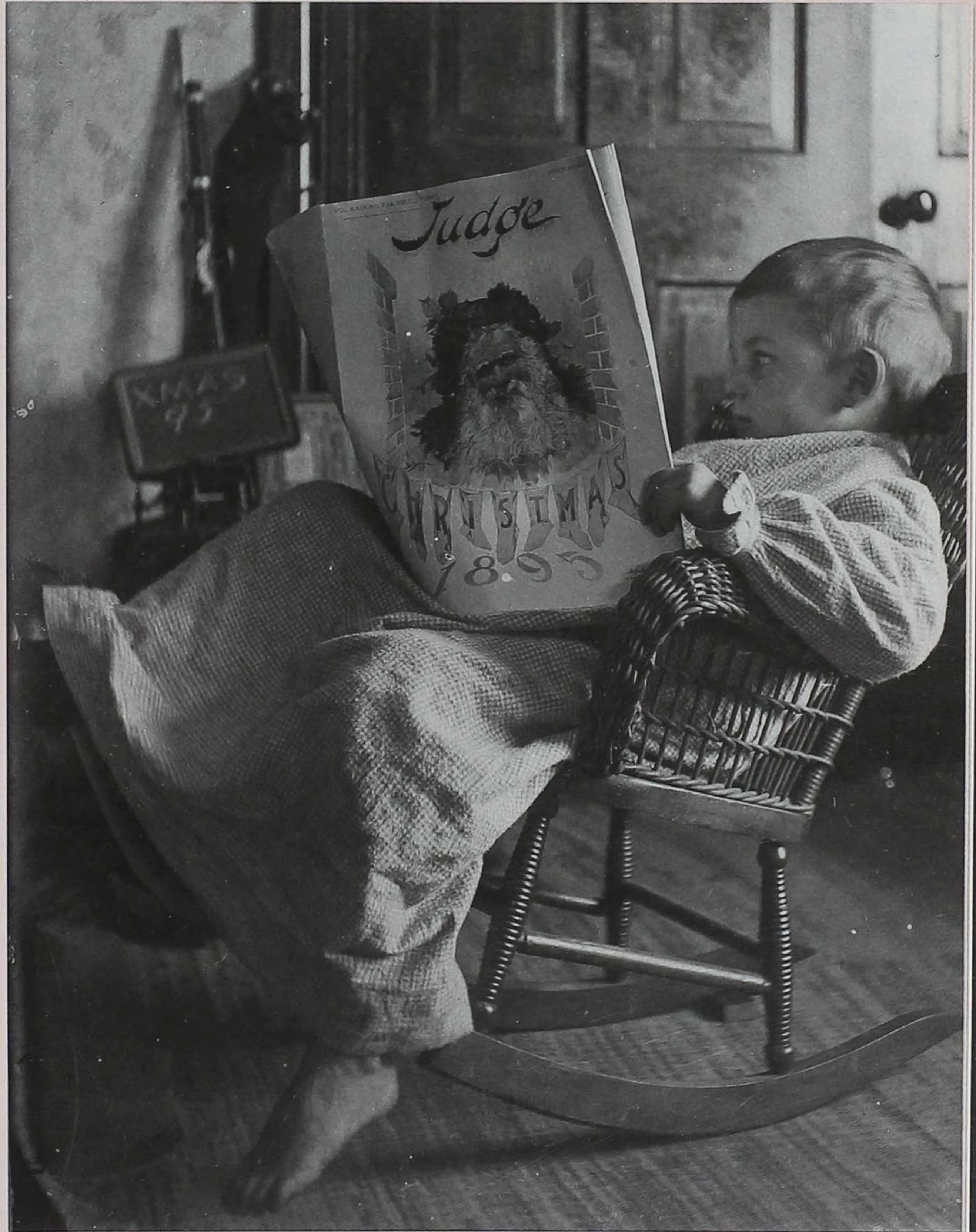
SHSI (IOWA CITY)

simpler, kindlier past, before the advent of industrialism, class strife, [and] unchecked competition," Marling tells us. Counter to the drunken revelry and the creeping commercialism, Irving's "Olde Christmas" played into a consolidated and nationalized Christmas, fueled by "trends and events ... as benign as the expansion of national media, as relentless as the development of marketplace and industry, and as cataclysmic as the Civil War," according to historian Penne L. Restad.

"There never was a time when Christmas existed as an unsullied domestic idyll, immune to the taint of commercialism," historian Stephen Nissenbaum writes. "Perhaps the very speed and intensity with which those essentially new rituals [of Santa Claus and the Christmas tree] were claimed as timeless traditions shows how powerful was the need to keep the relationship between family life and a commercial economy hidden from view—to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding something troublesome about the world they were making."

Do we want to hear all this from historians? Do we want to learn that the commercialism we decry is as traditional as the Christmas trees we cherish? Do we want to know that already in 1850, author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe complained that "there are worlds of money wasted [at Christmas time] in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got."

The other important question is whether the historians' conclusions presented on the following pages reflect the traditions and changes in the culture of Christmas in your own families and communities. Most of their research reflects what middle-class Americans were advised or expected to do, and much of it stops at



the mid-20th century. We invite you to send us your own accounts of the holidays in the last five decades.

How has Iowa fit into the big picture of the culture of Christmas? Turn the page and meet several Iowans of Christmases past.

Above: Santa smiles from the cover of the humor magazine *Judge* as a barefoot Fred Foster peruses the contents (Iowa Falls, 1895). Opposite: Another quiet Christmas moment for a lad in his rocking chair (Amana Colonies, circa 1950).



Holiday Cards

To send or not to send?

In the second half of the 19th century, few did. Christmas cards were lovely but costly. Having mastered lithography in multiple colors, the Louis Prang Company in Boston produced particularly beautiful double-sided cards, from the 1870s to 1890 (similar to the fringed card above). Flowers and birds were commonplace on Victorian Christmas cards. Other cards were actually small booklets of Christmas verse (see the the stocking above).

At the turn of the century, lower postal rates and improved mail delivery contributed to the popularity and

affordability of Christmas cards, particularly in the post-card format. Some of the finest—like the three below—were imported from Germany and Austria until World War I. In 1918, the newly formed U.S. Greeting Card Association suggested display and marketing tips to retailers and encouraged Americans to send cards to bolster wartime morale. During World War II, card manufacturers created cards specifically for soldiers, for mothers of soldiers, and for families who had lost loved ones.

By 1958, the average U.S. household sent about a hundred cards and proudly displayed those received as an

ALL CARDS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)





Top: Twigs spell out the year 1908, and a magic lantern projects a rosy-cheeked doll in a 1909 Christmas postcard printed in Germany. Right: A 1930s card echoes the nostalgic "Olde Christmas." Other cards on this page exemplify personalized photo cards sent by families and businesses, and cards from World War II and the more optimistic years after.



illustration of the family's broad social network. Although traditional cards with secular and religious scenes and symbols remained popular, consumers also chose new styles: humorous cards that poked fun at the holidays; customized cards with family or business photos; and the Christmas letter, updating recipients on family events that entire past year.



Temple of Economy

Here We Are Again With a Full Line
of Toys and Holiday Goods



For 8 years we have catered to the people of Marshalltown and vicinity in Fancy Goods for Holidays, but we think this year we have the best line we ever had. We can show you Celluloid Collar and Cuff Boxes, Work Boxes, Comb and Brush Sets, Smoking Sets, Manicure Sets, Shaving Sets, in endless variety. In China our Salad Sets, Sugar and Cream Sets, Spoon Trays, Celery Trays; Hair Receivers are of the most delicate tints and exquisite decorations. Our Cut Glass stock this year must be seen to be appreciated. We also have Dinner Sets, Water Sets, Chamber Sets by the hundreds and above all at prices you can afford to pay. Don't buy until you visit the

Temple of Economy

Shopping

Christmas brings "mingled hope and dread—hopefulness over dreams of what we may receive, and dread at the thought of what we shall have to give," warned *The Nation* magazine in 1883.

Thanks to increased manufacturing and improved transportation, consumers could now choose from a wealth of merchandise, and the custom of Christmas gift-giving now expanded from children to adults. To the Victorians, gifts represented social relationships; as one's social and business circles widened, the gift list lengthened. Many fulfilled this new social obligation by giving gimcracks and geegaws—cheap, poorly made, relatively useless items that had little value except as tokens of friendship and remembrance. But the custom also drew weary critics.

"The modern expansion of the custom of giving Christmas presents has done more than anything else to rob Christmas of its traditional joyousness," the *New York Tribune* sighed in 1894. "Most people nowadays are so fagged out, physically and mentally, by the time Christmas Day arrives that they are in no condition to enjoy it. . . . As soon as the Thanksgiving turkey is eaten, the great question of buying Christmas presents begins to take the terrifying shape it has come to assume in recent years." Simply put, "The season of Christmas needs to be dematerialized."

Sound familiar?

Social commentators called it the "Gift Question," declaring that excessive gift-giving to ever more acquaint-

1907 ad, *Marshalltown Times-Republican*.
Right: From 1941 Christmas wholesale catalog of Des Moines Drug Co.

Fashion Vanities

Single Loose Powder Vanities

- 111 (200) Sunburst Vanity. In gold finish. Retail 1.50
 666 (267) Square Vanity. In gold finish. Retail 2.00

Double Loose Powder Vanities

- 455 (200) Aztec Vanity. With Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Caribbean Blue, Frivolity Red, Jet. Retail 1.50
 327 (400) Vogue Duovanity (not illustrated). Loose Powder, Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Retail 3.00
 763 (267) Square Enamelled Vanity (not illustrated) with Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Black with White Border, White with Black Border. Retail 2.00
 328 (467) New Vogue Duovanity. Loose Powder, Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Retail 3.50
 382 (500) Tailored Twin Vanity. With Carmeen Rouge. Retail 3.75
 381 (667) Baroque Vanity. Gold-plated. With Carmeen Rouge. Retail 5.00
 380 (1000) Thunderbird Vanity. Gold and Platinum-plated. With Carmeen Rouge. Case in: Red, White, Blue. Retail 7.50
 777 (667) Jewel Flower Vanity with Carmeen Rouge. Retail 5.00

Triple Loose Powder Vanities

- 653 (367) Persian Vanity with Carmeen Rouge and Lipstick. Case in: Black, Star Ruby, Skyway Blue, White. Retail 2.75
 329 (500) New Vogue Trioovanity. With Carmeen Rouge and Full-sized Carmeen Lipstick. Case in: Gold and Silver Finish, Black and Silver Finish. Retail 3.75
 651 (467) Forget-Me-Not Jewelled Vanity With Carmeen Rouge and Lipstick. Retail 3.50



tances ought to be cut back for sanity's sake. Catalogs, merchandisers, and advertisers were only too happy to suggest the perfect gift for those who survived the cut. Card manufacturers pointed to Christmas cards as the way to show thoughtfulness but with little effort or cost. Shoppers focused on buying better-quality gifts but only for close friends and family.

To social reformers, the Gift Question was dwarfed by a more serious problem: the overworked, underpaid seasonal labor force (mostly women and children) in the poor working conditions of factories that geared up for the holidays. In stores, customers' last-minute shopping meant long, hectic hours for clerks (again, mostly women), leaving them little time for their own families. In 1912, the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving (SPUG) called for an end to the often obligatory practice of poorly paid store clerks giving gifts to their supervisors. Hoping to end clerks' long hours, the Consumers' League launched a "Shop Early Campaign." The league created a White List of stores reluctantly willing to limit store hours, and encouraged shoppers to frequent these "White List" businesses.

Attracting customers, of course, was retailers' goal. Christmas tableaux in department store windows were a common strategy. By the turn of the century, window dressers (including L. Frank Baum, of *Wizard of Oz* fame) advocated that the displays should appear alive by adding motion. Macy's had already modeled this idea in 1883; dolls seemed to be marching in its holiday window, via a steam-powered belt. Enchanted adults and children crowded up to department store windows to gaze upon twirling elves, dancing teddy bears, and softly falling snow, as toy trains circled endlessly.

Within a few decades, retailers

1041B—contains 50¢ Brushless. Airplane cover by Clayton Knight.

1041M—contains 50¢ Menthol-iced Shave. Glamour Girl cover by Bischoff.



1041P—contains 50¢ Lather Shave, Plain. Cover by Richard Taylor.

MENNEN

Famous Artists
 GIFT BOXES FOR MEN

Last year, Mennen Gift Boxes were a sensational success. This year they are even more attractive. Never before have Gift Boxes for Men had such appeal—cover designs with brilliant color illustrations by artists who rank as the leaders in their respective fields.



\$1.25 Boxes

1 Shave Cream	50
1 Skin Bracer	50
1 Talcum for Men	25
1 Shave Cream	10
Retail Value	\$ 1.35
Retail Price	1.25

*Boxes containing 50¢ Lather Shave contain 10¢ Brushless—and vice versa

... and More Shopping



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

further enticed shoppers by installing Toylands and Santa's Villages inside their stores, steering children and adults directly into the toy departments. In the 1940s, some 4,000 extra workers transformed Marshall Fields into a Christmas fairyland.

The day after Thanksgiving traditionally signaled the start of the shopping season. Throughout the Great Depression, retailers bemoaning sales slumps relentlessly argued for a longer shopping season between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Not until 1941 did Congress declare that Thanksgiving from there on would be the fourth Thursday (rather than the last) in November, guaranteeing four frenzied weeks for shopping.

Despite economic upswings, predicting holiday sales, and the sales force needed, challenged retailers in the years after the war. Would consumers shop in downtown department stores or specialty shops? Out in the suburbs, through catalogs, or at the new discount stores? Early in the season or on the final days? Store owners ordered smaller amounts of goods, wary of fads that ended too soon and even weather that was too nice. Studies had found that holiday sales rose when the weather was cold and clear—unlikely for shoppers in Florida or California, but a sure bet for those in Iowa.

SHSI (DES MOINES)



Above: Sign-up booth for a Christmas savings club, National Bank, Des Moines, 1958. By the 1910s, banks offered such plans to increase business and add to their public image. **Below:** Animated window display in Younkers store (Des Moines). **Left:** A Des Moines department store (1935).

SHSI (DES MOINES); YOUNKERS COLLECTION



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SHI (DES MOINES) DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

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SHI (DES MOINES) YOUYKERS COLLECTION

The Act of Giving

In the 1840s, historian Karal Ann Marling tells us, U.S. bookstores sold more copies of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* than of the Bible. His portrayal of the Bob Cratchit family enormously affected British and American attitudes toward Christmas and charity.

In many of his novels, Dickens wrote vividly of the urban poverty of rural and immigrant workers who flooded large cities in search of jobs during the Industrial Revolution. Although historian Stephen Nissenbaum contends that Ebenezer Scrooge's clerk Bob Cratchit wasn't exactly part of the oppressed lower classes, Marling says that *A Christmas Carol* put "unhappiness, misery, and human wretchedness on the Christmas-time agenda, in a sharp and dynamic contrast to the remnants of [Washington] Irving's *Old Christmas*," descriptions of a warm, hearty holiday.

Beginning in the 1880s, charities sponsored huge mass dinners for the poor: The Salvation Army (founded in the London slums in 1865) fed thousands at turn-of-the-century dinners in New York's Madison Square Garden. Wealthy donors could purchase tickets to watch the poor eat.

Social reformers argued that help for the poor should be given to organized charities throughout the year.

Christmas dinner for four Iowa children in 1936, near Smithland. Farm Security Administration photographer Russell Lee photographed the "feast" of potatoes, cabbage, and pie.



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SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

PTA members gather at Creston radio station KSIB to prepare 1,400 gifts for Santa to distribute to needy youngsters (1955).

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Christmas seals began in 1907, thanks to the Red Cross and urban reformer Jacob Riis. Intended to raise money to fight lung disease, the seals also added color to holiday packages and mail.

not directly to homeless children and street beggars or at once-a-year Christmas dinners. "Dickens did more harm than anyone else," the *Saturday Evening Post* declared. "A great Christmas dinner, in the minds of many, cancels the charity obligations of the entire year."

To encourage holiday charity, mainstream magazines and newspapers in December had routinely published touching, sentimental stories of personal generosity to the poor. But this kind of story disappeared as the new century's progressive movement pushed hard and successfully for coordinated, year-round social relief through designated organizations. During the Great Depression, however, the sentimental stories reap-

peared, as Americans realized that no one was immune to hard times. Community Christmas projects increased during and after the world wars as Americans collaborated on shipments for overseas soldiers and war-torn and displaced Europeans.

Today, Americans continue Christmas charity projects through churches, social and service clubs, and relief organizations. And Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is reincarnated yearly on stage and screen, though the settings may be modern-day America rather than 19th-century England.



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

Bell in hand and bonnet on head, a Salvation Army worker smiles as a passerby drops coins into the collection kettle (Des Moines, 1933). In the late 19th century, the Salvation Army expanded its Christmas bell-ringing from England to this nation.

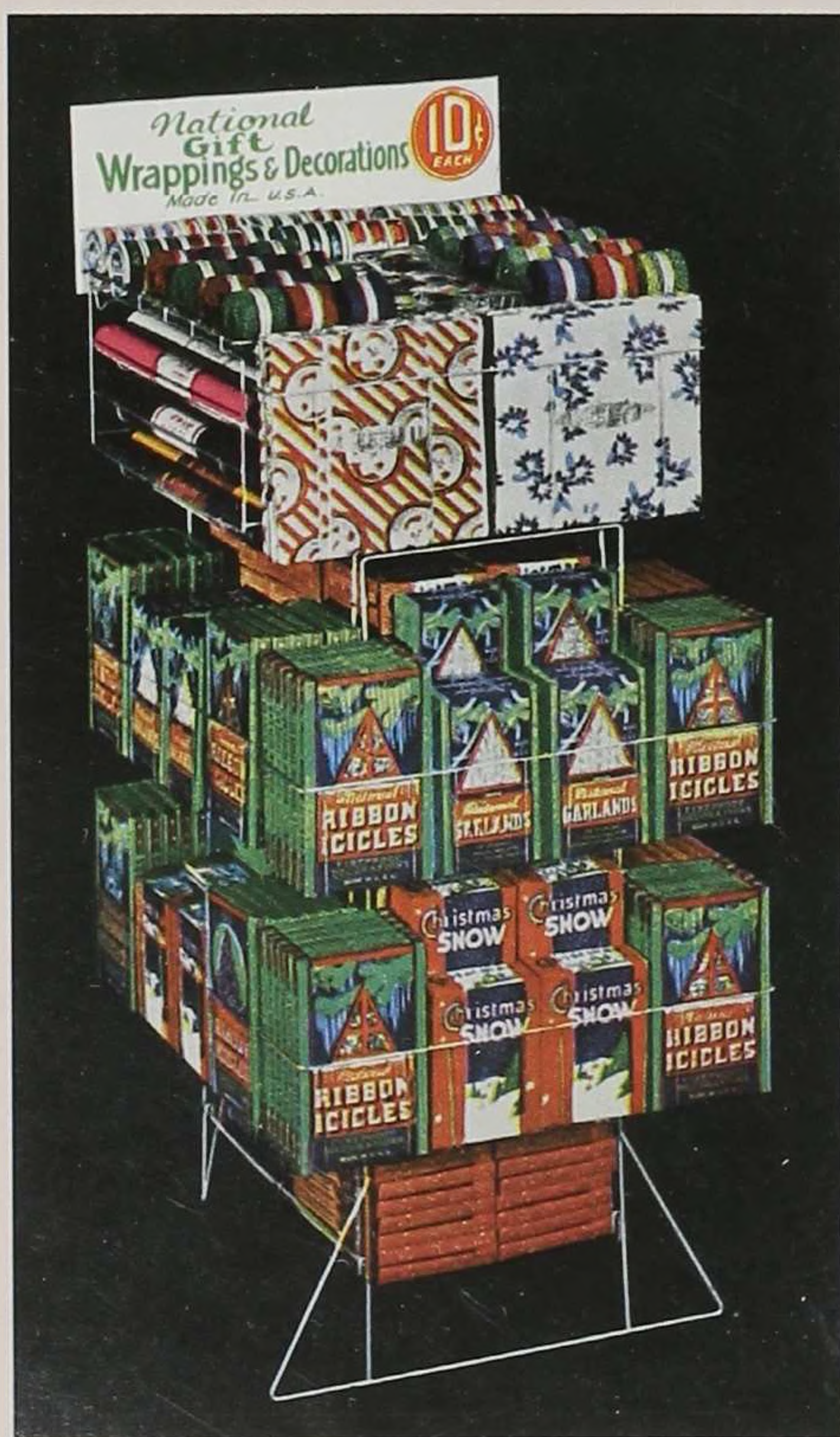
Adding a Little Mystery

As presents grew too large to be tied to the Christmas tree, wrapping the presents became another holiday custom. In the early years, the choices of wrapping material were few: white, red, and green tissue paper, secured with straight pins, metallic cord, and gummed seals. Wrapping was considered a woman's responsibility and pleasure, a way to add both her personal touch and a sense of mystery to the gift—though *Good Housekeeping* in 1910 warned its readers that men preferred cigars of high quality over cigars handsomely packaged. Several historians contend that wrapping paper made it momentarily less evident that the gift was store-bought. But Karal Ann Marling believes women wrapped gifts out of the “Victorian aesthetic of containment, enhancement, and disguise.”

By 1912, manufacturers often packaged holiday merchandise in “holly boxes,” cardboard boxes preprinted with

holly and other Christmas symbols. In their minds, this added further value to the gift; many customers agreed. About the same time, the choices of wrapping paper and decorations expanded. Even during the Great Depression, frugal gifts were often wrapped in fancy paper.

War rationing limited choices to thin gift-wrap paper that tore easily; many just used what was on hand, such as shelf paper and yarn. But in the 1950s consumers were awash in wrapping papers printed in dozens of patterns, shiny bows, and tiny snowmen or Santas to attach as the final touch. Each holiday, women's magazines offered sophisticated ideas for wrapping gifts, in the expectation that women had time for one more holiday task. A 1950s humorist joked that a woman “must choose between no less than fourteen approved methods of looping a piece of . . . ribbon around a box.”



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SHSI (DES MOINES)

Robert Goddard of Des Moines clutches a gift for his brother. Opposite: Olive L. Dyer, of Des Moines, wraps gifts at the Salvation Army for children whose parents are in prison (1960), and wrapping-paper display from a 1941 wholesale catalog.



Choosing the Perfect Tree



MULTIPLE XMAS TREE SETS FOR INDOOR USE

New Reflector (Multiple) Set



No. 55 (241) - A 7 LIGHT REFLECTOR INDOOR (MULTIPLE) SET with C-7% Mazda 150 Volt assorted colored lamps. The Shining Reflectors bring out the beauty of the colored lights, and also ornaments the tree. The Metal Reflectors are Chromium Finish. This set is packaged as illustrated and may be used as furnished, or it can be strung on the tree in the same continuous manner as the regular set. An Adze Connector on end of string for attaching additional sets.

Std. Price: 25. Wt. 25 lbs. Retail \$1.75 Ea.

Star-Light Metal Reflectors
*** CHROMIUM FINISH ***



No. 22 (201) - ACME STAR-LIGHT REFLECTORS can be used on Xmas Tree Sets having the C-6 or C-7% Mazda Lamps. These Reflectors make a very attractive setting on the Xmas Tree. A variety of designs (10 to 100) in an Assortment of 100 Reflectors in the Display Carton.

Std. Price: 1000 Wt. 25 lbs. Retail \$3.00 C

FULL TREE CLIP



No. 57-M (134) - A 7 LIGHT INDOOR MULTIPLE SET same as No. 57 but with Tree Clips on Sockets that will hold lamps in place on Branch of Tree.

Std. Price: 50. Wt. 22 lbs. Retail \$1.50 Ea.

WHITE CORD ALL BLUE LAMPS

No. 57-Y (136) - 7 LIGHT INDOOR MULTIPLE SET with White Cord having White Sockets and C-7% All Blue Mazda Lamps. The Blue and White combination makes a very effective Tree Trim. WITH TREE CLIPS on Sockets to hold lamps in place on Branch of Tree.

Std. Price: 50 Wt. 22 lbs. Retail \$1.50 Ea.

Clockwise from top left: "Celesta Violet, Xmas 1911" with a stick tree festooned with popcorn. Lenore Salvaneschi makes a tree stand, circa 1920. Ad from 1941 wholesale catalog for tree lights. Herb Stamper shows Kay Louise Clark and her mother a tree from his Des Moines tree lot (1944). Opposite: Volunteer Mabel Cannon adorns an aluminum tree at Iowa Methodist Hospital (Des Moines, 1959).

As early as 1860, the Christmas tree was “women’s work, trimmed under a veil of breathless secrecy,” writes Karal Ann Marling. “The closed doors [to the parlor] were necessary because the presents, unwrapped except for candies in dangling containers, were openly exposed, as decorations on the tree.” Lighted candles added to the tree’s magic and drama—and risk. In 1908, many insurance companies no longer covered fires related to Christmas trees and candles. Although electric lights appeared on some trees as early as the 1880s, most people continued to use closely watched candles; rural Americans often lacked electricity until the 1930s.

American clergy eventually brought Christmas trees—and Santa—into their churches, using them to teach about the importance of giving and the rewards of good behavior.

Alarmed by dwindling natural resources, some conservationists protested holiday cutting of fresh trees in U.S. forests, but that didn’t dampen Americans’ ardor for trees.

It was style rather than a nature ethic that sold some consumers on new kinds of trees. The startling aluminum tree of the 1950s was illuminated by a spotlight and a rotating color wheel, since electric lights and metal trees don’t mix. Fluffy flocked trees of the 1960s came in blue, pink, and lavender. So much for Christmas greenery.

As Marling writes, “Today’s Christmas tree is one of the few purely aesthetic objects created by families and individuals. It is possible to buy a tree, pretrimmed and ready to go, but most households still rummage in the attic for the old decorations, add a few new ones, and create [a display of] symmetry, balance, and harmony,” a statement “about taste [and] family traditions.”



SHS (DES MOINES), DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

Celebrating Community

Although Christmas is an intensely home-centered holiday, U.S. communities early in the century staged outdoor festivals and decorated trees in public squares. Social reformer Jacob Riis argued for such “public” outdoor Christmas trees because they symbolized giving and provided a common ground for all social classes. Some historians tie public festivals to the progressive movement, in which citizens’ duties included coming together to build community, identity, and consensus.

Although such abstract goals may not have been met, the festivals and trees did provide

beauty and entertainment. As a poor woman in New York confided, “Those rich people who give so much money away on Christmas always get the idea that the poor need something to eat. They forget that we also like to look at nice things and hear lovely things.”

Only a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, Karal Ann Marling relates, President Franklin D. Roosevelt briefly lit up the Christmas tree outside the White House, ignoring the city-wide blackout and ban on holiday lights “because he understood the value of symbols.”

Outdoor lighting began to catch on in the late 1920s. General Electric and other companies sponsored neighborhood contests to promote sales. As private citizens strung lights along eaves and set holiday characters on front lawns, towns decked downtown streets to build holiday spirit and welcome customers.

Left: Downtown Mason City, 1940s. Below: Frank J. Iten house (Clinton, 1934). Right: Lights on the Jasper County Courthouse brighten the night over Newton (1952), a tradition since the mid-1930s. Pilots detoured over Newton for passengers’ enjoyment.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SHSI (DES MOINES): WIDE WORLD PHOTO



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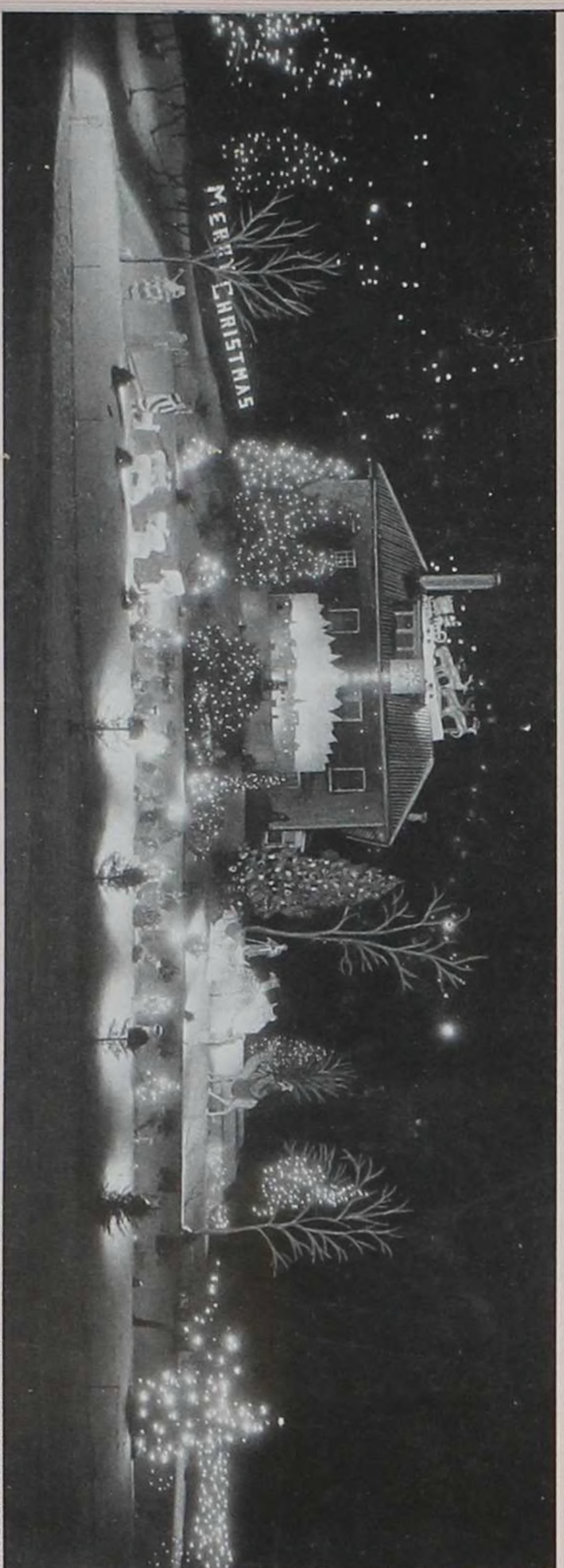
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SPS (IOWA CITY)



SPS (DES MOINES), DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



SPS (DES MOINES), WIDE WORLD PHOTO



SHS (IOWA CITY) DONALD L. ULTANG COLLECTION

Coming Home

"At no other time of year is absence from home considered more poignantly tragic than at Christmas," writes scholar Patrick McGreevy. This, too, is part of the culture of Christmas.

One of Thomas Nast's illustrations during the Civil War depicts the reunion around the Christmas tree of a returning soldier and his family. As Victorian society grew increasingly urban and industrial, home and family became the ideal, a refuge from the harsh, competitive outside world of work. "By approximately 1870," McGreevy writes, "the Christmas tree, Santa Claus, intimate gift giving, and the emphasis on children were the collective focus of a celebration centered on the family home."

It was no different in the mid-20th century, when Bing Crosby crooned "I'll Be Home for Christmas" or "There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays."

Nor is it any different in this century. Every year television dramas echo the theme of the holiday homecoming. Returning travelers overcome distant war and vile weather, demanding jobs and family dissension, to open the front door and shake off the snow, just as the carols begin or the Christmas dinner is served. In today's society of great mobility and blended families, Bing Crosby still makes his promise, and we still hold him to it: "Be sure and get home for Christmas."

A family celebrates Christmas Eve, 1954, in Shenandoah, as photographed by Donald L. Utang.



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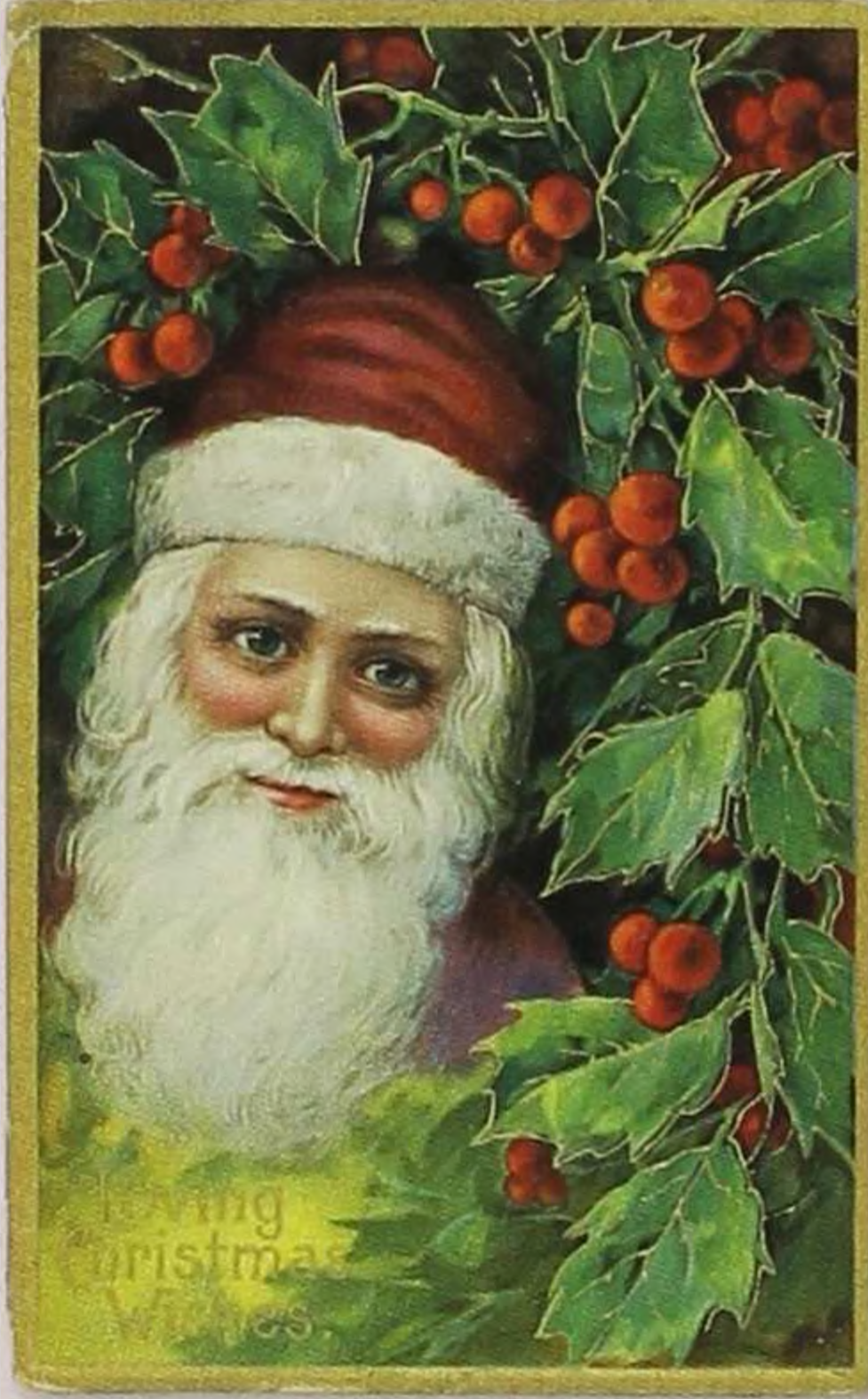
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SHSI (IOWA CITY)



A Right Jolly Old Elf

As magical as Santa is, it should come as no surprise that in the early 19th century, Americans imagined and portrayed him in various sizes, costumes, and demeanors. His metamorphosis into the Santa we know today began with his elfin image in the poem " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," generally attributed to theologian Clement Clarke Moore in 1822.

Compared to European predecessors like Pelsnickel and Knecht Rupprecht, who punished naughty children by giving them switches or lumps of coal instead of gifts, the U.S. Santa let go of his ethnic costumes and customs and grew increasingly kind and forgiving—and commercial.

Illustrator Thomas Nast enlarged the right jolly old elf to adult size in his drawings for *Harper's Weekly* in the 1860s. Santa's home at the North Pole is also attributed to Nast, who may have been building off of the public's interest in an 1845 Arctic expedition that had vanished. By mid-century, historian Penne L. Restad writes, Santa had become "a full-fledged product of American humor and naive optimism. . . . No American folk character was more widely embraced and accepted as real."

And what about Mrs. Claus? Louisa May Alcott gave Santa a wife in one of her novels; so did poet Katherine Lee Bates. Fairies and elves played key roles in L. Frank Baum's fantasy novel, *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* (1902).

The first Santa Claus school began in 1934; a week of classes instructed Santa wannabes in child psychiatry, toy industry economics, Santa history, showmanship, and salesmanship. Although some 20th-century child experts

SHSI (IOWA CITY): ILHOP

OPPOSITE PHOTO: SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Clutching gifts, children file past Santa at a family Christmas party of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, Local 3, Cedar Rapids, 1950s. Right: Bonne Grabenstein (of Knoxville) mails a letter to Santa (Des Moines, 1947).



warned that adults were deceiving their children regarding Santa and sowing distrust, Santa nevertheless remains the paramount figure in the U.S. culture of Christmas. Unabashedly used for commercial purposes, he is also unabashedly and affectionately eternalized by many of us.

Santa's trusty sidekick Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was created in 1939, when Montgomery Ward asked copywriter Robert May to create a gimmick to draw in customers. Building on the Ugly Duckling theme, May wrote a poem about a young outcast reindeer, and the store distributed 2.5 million copies of the booklet that year. After the war Johnny Marks used the verse as the basis of lyrics and Gene Autry recorded the song. Rudolph's popularity has led to hundreds of licensed products.

Although Rudolph helped guide Santa through the foggy sky, Colonel Harry Shoup kept him safe up there, according to writer Susan Waggoner. In 1955 a Colorado Springs department store ad included the "number of the special Santa line. The [telephone] number had a one-digit typo, and when children dialed it, they were connected with the Operations Hotline of the Continental Air Defense Command [later NORAD], the agency in charge of detecting incoming missiles." Shoup, who answered the phone, "quickly figured out what had happened and played

along. Claiming to be one of Santa's helpers, Shoup explained that his job was to keep the skies safe for Santa's journey, and told the excited children that he could see Santa's sleigh on the radar monitor in front of him."

Even today, an occasional television or radio broadcaster winks at journalism standards to help Santa Claus navigate the dark skies of Christmas Eve.

Overleaf: A horse-drawn sleigh and an automobile stop outside a small-town store, where Santa Claus is the center of attention.

Below: Saint Nicholas arrives by horse, accompanied on the left by Black Peter, for naughty children (Pella, 1936). Right: Photographer Donald L. Ultang captured this moment of a patient Santa and five-year-old Mary Rose McClavy keeping her distance (1953).



SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



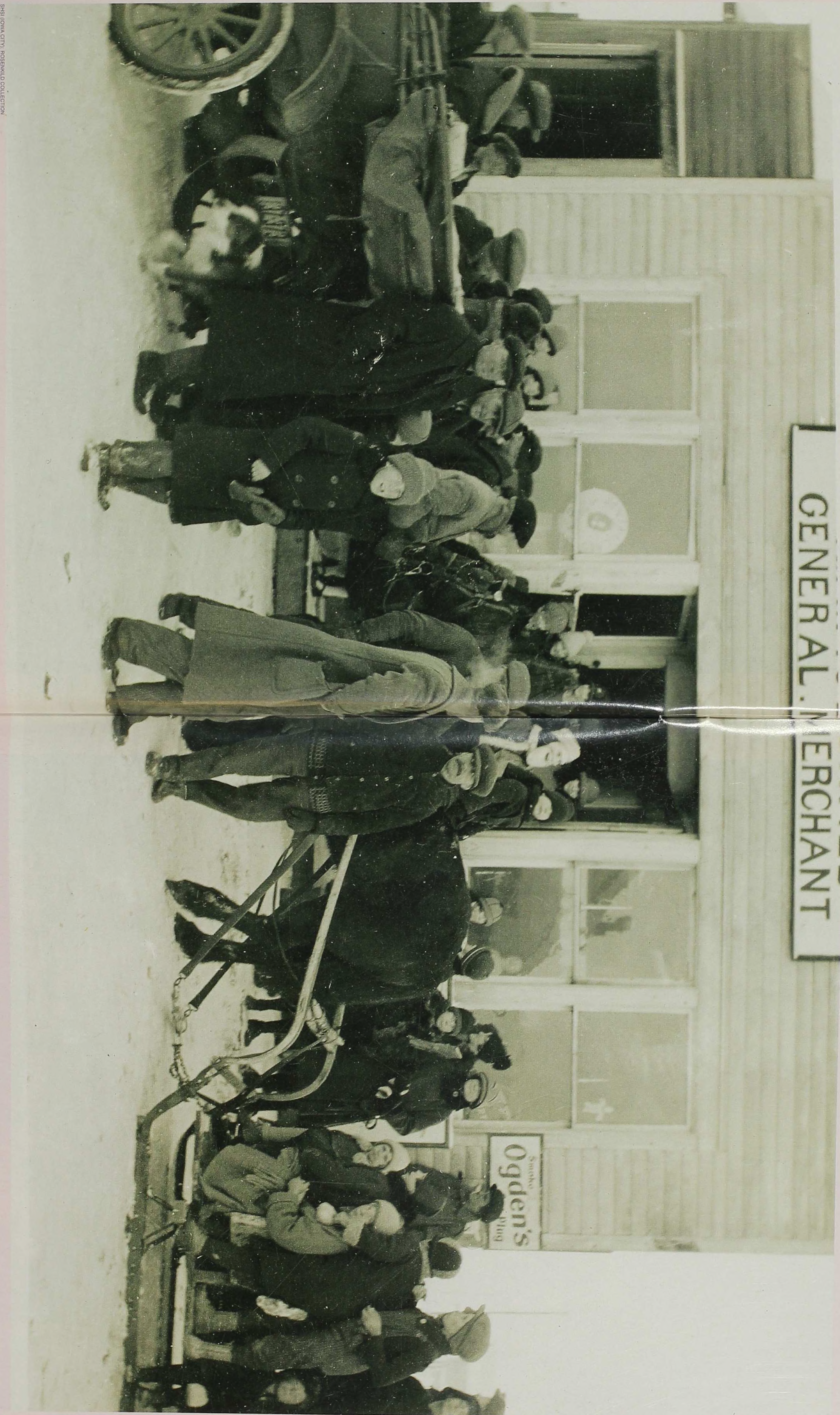
SHSI (IOWA CITY) DONALD L. ULTANG COLLECTION



SHS (IOWA CITY); ROSENKILD COLLECTION

MERCHANT





SHS IOWA CITY ROSENKIND COLLECTION



A B C D E F G H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

MARION
BUCHET.
MERRY
CHRISTMAS
1908.

Abundance Revealed

Some of the best evidence for what middle- and upper-class children received for Christmas is in the relatively common historical photographs in which the children pose before the tree with their gifts, most of them toys. Photos of adults and their actual presents are less common, although period advertisements and catalogs tell us what merchandisers thought adults should be given.

Were many gifts homemade? Historian Karal Ann Marling thinks not: "The homemade gift is part of a

Christmas mythology of simpler, better times before capitalism corrupted the purity of a religious holiday. Although some parents did make gifts for their children, and ladies' handicrafts flourished throughout the Victorian era, it is clear that widespread celebration of the holiday and provision of manufactured presents went hand in hand."

Other historians are not so certain. Women's and children's magazines were filled with instructions for handcrafted gifts, particularly covers

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



ALL FOUR IMAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Above: "Christmas dream," Keokuk. Right: A toddler ignores his gifts. Note that already Mickey Mouse competes with traditional tops, blocks, and teddy bears (see far right). Opposite: Marian Buchet stands amidst typical gifts for girls (1908).



When 1950s westerns reigned on television, cowboy hats and toy guns were typical gifts for boys (above, Jerry and Steve Husman, Monticello, 1958). Toy guns were also popular at the turn of the century to teach boys to be manly. Lead tinsel—as on this tree—added considerable sparkle, but it was banned in the late 1960s because of the environmental hazards of lead.

and containers for Victorian necessities and niceties—slippers, needles, glasses, sachet, buttons, brooches, hairpins. Some magazines advertised already assembled kits or partially completed projects, shortening the task but still qualifying as a homemade

gift. Today, women's magazines and craft books still offer dozens of homemade gift ideas, feeding the belief that a homemade gift conveys thoughtfulness, talent, thrift, and the personality of both the giver and the receiver.

In the Victorian world in which

males and females were expected to have separate roles, gifts matched those expectations. Girls received gifts that would prepare them for their future roles as homemakers and family nurturers: toy dishes and toy furniture, of course, and dolls, always

dolls. Boys, especially after the turn of the century, received gifts appropriate for society's image of the ideal boy, physically and morally strong. Chemistry and building sets furthered his education. By the 1920s, social arbiters considered that girls, too, were worthy of sports equipment as gifts.

Historian William B. Waits looked at hundreds and hundreds of advertisements, trade journals, and mass-circulation magazines from 1900 to 1940 to trace changes in Christmas gifts, as advised by the print media. What he also found were the changing images of males and females. In the century's first two decades,

women were not to assume that they could understand men's complex world of work. Although a fine pen set for a husband's desk was considered appropriate, the wife's best gifts should add to his comfort and appearance (cuff links, razors, cigars, ties, slippers, and so on).

What were husbands advised to buy? Ads showed active women using labor-saving appliances, like vacuums; with smaller homes and fewer domestics, women took on more of their own housework. By the 1920s, women were more independent of the house and wanting smart, stylish, and modern gifts. Men, too, wanted

the modern "Arrow shirt" look. During the Great Depression, ironically, some ads portrayed women as aloof and dignified, dressed in elegant gowns next to the fine furniture and silver sets they desired. Such ads played on Americans' fantasy for flush times, as did 1930s Hollywood movies. Nevertheless, most gifts of the Depression and war years were practical and durable. As the war ended, the need to maintain jobs and high levels of production flooded the market with an abundance of new consumer goods in a variety of styles and colors—all the more to advertise as the ideal gifts to open on Christmas.

SHSI (IOWA CITY): GRUMSTRUP COLLECTION



An electric train set delights a youngster in the 1950s. In 1904, the toy train manufacturer Lionel furnished major retailers with train sets to use in their holiday window displays. In homes, toy trains were often laid out to circle the Christmas tree.



December 26, 1944: Reaching for a bright tree light, Jimmy Corder suddenly finds out that Christmas is all over . . . him. From above, the three-year-old's mother reaches down to rescue him.

Christmas Past

"Christmas rituals . . . transfigure our ordinary behavior in an almost magical fashion, in ways that reveal something of what we would like to be, what we once were, or what we are becoming despite ourselves," says Stephen Nissenbaum.

Another Christmas ritual, though hardly magical, is the earnest wish to "cut back," to diminish holiday stress. This, too, has been a tradition in the U.S. culture of Christmas.

What good is it to realize that those before us also faced holiday stress and commercialism and longed for simpler times? Perhaps this is where knowing our history can help us

define the common ground of today and earlier times, and to recognize that external forces—social status, war, the marketplace, the mass media—have long influenced a holiday powered by tradition and celebrated in the heart. For many of us, the culture of Christmas is part of who we are. ❖

Other holidays and rites of passage in Iowa

Holidays are important traditions in Iowa history, and it is the mission of the State Historical Society of Iowa to preserve that history for the future. We are seeking donations of photographs, written accounts, printed material, decorations, or other things that reveal how Iowans have celebrated cultural, ethnic, and religious holidays and rites of passage.

If you have material you would like to donate, please first contact Becki Plunkett (Becki.Plunkett@iowa.gov, 515-281-8976) or Michael Smith (Michael.Smith@iowa.gov, 515-281-3859). Either can be reached by mail at SHSI, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.

Share your accounts of Christmas in recent decades

The previous article traces the culture of Christmas up through the mid-20th century. Now we're curious about how you and your community have celebrated Christmas in the decades since World War II. We invite you to send written accounts of your holiday preparations and celebrations. Be as detailed or brief as you wish. If you address changes or new traditions, consider including the personal or social reasons behind those changes.

Be sure to tell us what years and location you are writing about. Include your name, address, phone, and age in 2005. Your signature will indicate that you grant permission for us to preserve your responses in the State Historical Society of Iowa collections for researchers and others to use. We hope to publish some of your accounts in the Winter 2006 issue of this magazine. That may seem like a long time from now—but we all know how quickly Christmas comes every year! Thanks for your interest in recording and preserving Iowa history.

Send your accounts to Editor, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240, or by e-mail to Ginalie-Swaim@uiowa.edu.

For additional reading

Several studies of Christmas make wonderful reading. Here are some that I found most useful for the preceding article and were the sources of many of the examples and quotations used.

- Karal Ann Marling, *Merry Christmas: Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (NY: Knopf, 1998).
- Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (NY: Oxford, 1995).
- William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (NY: New York University Press, 1993).

Additional sources include: James H. Barnett, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture* (1954; reprint, Salem, NH: Ayer, 1984); G. Wallace Chessman, "Thanksgiving: Another FDR Experiment," *Prologue* 32 (Fall 1990); Patrick McGreevy, "Place in the American Christmas," *Geographical Review* 80 (January 1990); Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Commercialization of the Calendar: American Holidays and the Culture of Consumption, 1870–1930," *Journal of American History* 78 (December 1991); and Susan Waggoner, *It's a Wonderful Christmas: The Best of the Holidays 1940–1965* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2004). —The Editor