

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



An Iowa Christmas Story Sampler

Christmas entertainment in 1869

One of the first Christmas entertainments within my recollection was held [in 1869 in Decatur County] in the old Methodist Episcopal Church, where the Carnegie Library now stands. The tree was not a graceful evergreen, but a wild crabapple from the backyard of Ira B. Ryan's home on West Commercial Street. The children covered its branches with bright-colored paper and strands of popcorn.

Aunt Patterson made tissue paper snowballs with which to adorn it.

The teachers made silver paper baskets, which were filled with nuts and candy for each scholar. Of the program I remember that Jennie Blodgett directed the music; I. P. Martin made a speech about the use of profane language. Uzz Tharp and Heck Sanford sang a comic song. Pretty little Alice Dilsaver recited in trumpet tones "Hang Up the Baby's Stocking." Dan Porter picked a fandangle (I think that was what he called it) on a guitar. Rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed Emma and Ollie Gillham, looking like big "chainy" dolls, sang a song about a lost kitten. Then J. L. Young representing Santa Claus distributed the presents. The most popular little girls received sugar apples and china dollheads (dolls had no bodies in those days).

The larger girls received bottles of choice perfumery, such as musk and bergamot. The big boys received bear-shaped bottles of hair oil and candy hearts bearing sentiments of affection, the latter creating much merriment, being read by Santa Claus before they reached their owners.

On the top of the tree was a huge turkey for Rev. G. P. Bennett.

But the crowning event of the holiday week was the annual "festible" held in the old brick schoolhouse. Every man, woman and child that could raise the necessary four bits attended. Long before dark the crowd began to arrive. The tables extended the entire length of the room and were filled with every product the village and countryside afforded. In those days we had no smothered or fricasseed chicken, but great platters of fried and roasted fowls; no veal loaf or jellied beef, but

stacks of old-fashioned roast beef, home-cured ham and plenty of crisp, juicy turkey. No salads, olives or celery, but pickles galore, cucumbers, beets, mango, pickled eggs, piccililli and cold slaw. No patties, but each plate was supplied with a little jelly tart.

For dessert we could boast no sherbet, ices or frappe, but oceans of preserves, pies and cakes. Stem glass dishes were passed back and forth containing crabapple, tomato, ground cherry, plum, wild strawberry, watermelon and citron preserves.

The pies were equally as varied, gooseberry, blackberry, elderberry, squash, pumpkin, grape and vinegar.

Beside each plate was a goblet filled with float, ornamented with a bit of currant jelly. Conspicuous among the viands were Mrs. Uriah Bobbit's and Mrs. S. C. Thompson's sugar-coated rusks, Mrs. J. B. Lunbeck's and Mrs. S. H. Gates' golden crulls, Mrs. S. W. Hurst's white mountain cake adorned with a bouquet of artificial flowers, Mrs. L. H. Sales' big fruit cake, Mrs. I. N. Clark's cake trimmed with red gum-drops, Mrs. Udell's pyramid cake formed of forty-two small cakes, Mrs. Craigo's fine marble cake, Mrs. Hildreth's white-frosted cake with the date, "1869," outlined in red sand.

In place of carnations and roses the center of each table was decked with baskets of Aunt Rhoda Hawkins' feather flowers of brilliant hues.

The baskets were made of crystallized alum and glittered and sparkled under the blinking candles, making a veritable Jack Frost scene. How merry everyone seemed as they marched around viewing the tables. There was no changing of plates; everything to eat in sight. How "smelly" the coffee and the baked beans and mashed potatoes when the lids were lifted from the big tureens!

Hettie Rogers, Ada Kirk, Anna Gardner, Ester Sanger, "Doc" Warner and Wesley Silvers poured the coffee—not in little china shells, but in big heavy cups that held nearly a pint, and that completed the serving. After supper we had some singing led by Jabez Dawson; then the young folks played "Needle's Eye," Billy Boone, Wade Wood,

Billy Smith and Cass Sales got "choosed" the oftenest. . . . Kittie Givens, Hattie Lindsey, Emma Vaughn and Hila Fishburn were the belles of the evening—perhaps on account of their beautiful curls, the kind that curled naturally—around a hot poker. Among the little misses that caused much envy by the prettiness of their dresses were Katie Finley, in bright Scotch plaid; Emma Elsworth, in flowered Marseillaise; Helen Dawson, in red alpaca, and Etta McClelland, in blue wool delaine trimmed with cloverleaf tetin. There were many little boys present, but none attracted more attention than little Harry and Orra Long, in velveteen sailor suits, with red sashes tied military fashion.

Next came Aunt Jane Miller's big cake containing a gold ring. The cake was cut in many pieces, each piece

selling at 10 cents. Sam Ellis drew the ring and gave it to Mollie Miles or Emma Schaffer—I have now forgotten which. Then a cane was voted to the laziest man, and a cake to the handsomest lady. Albert Hale carried off the cane, and Mrs. E. J. Close won the cake. The big "festible" netted over one hundred dollars for the schoolhouse organ, and thus closed the holiday season of 1869, which probably for good fellowship and real enjoyment is not far surpassed by the more elaborate festivities of the present day.

Popcorn and cranberries and lacelike festoons

We always had a tree [in our church], and everybody far and near came to some one of these Christmas programs, usually in sleds and sleighs. The decorations of all trees consisted of long strings of popcorn and cranberries and we knew how to cut red and white tissue paper into lacelike festoons. And these, together with some big red apples and the candies, constituted the trimmings.

The program was the ordinary Sunday school type—Christmas songs, readings and exercises by classes. It was the custom for many years at our church for the parents to bring a small gift to be placed under the tree for each child and any other gifts could be brought for distribution. Hence quite often, the young men would bring gifts for their especial girl friends. And when the program was over, it would conclude with the singing of one of the Christmas songs and during the singing the young men as a lighting committee would come forward with their long tapers and light the candles on the tree.

At the conclusion of this, there would be a lot of stamping and sleigh bell ringing outside the door and Santa would come bounding in.

He was always dressed in a bright red suit with white cotton trimmings and his medium circumference usually exceeded his altitude. When he had reached the platform and given his greetings to the children, the distribution of gifts began, and no child in the audience was omitted for if by any chance no gifts had been placed for one such, the Sunday School teachers and a committee had provided some little parcels as emergencies.

In connection with this part of our program, I have a story. I cannot vouch for its authenticity for it was told to me by another person. It seemed there was a certain young man who was engaged to be married and he wanted to give his betrothed something nice. In those days every house had a center table in the front room and on that table there was almost always one of those huge photograph albums. Some of them had elaborately decorated celluloid backs, some had plush, but all were highly ornamental and contained a collection of family portraits.

This young gentleman looked around and bought the nicest and most unique one he could find and he put it on the Christmas tree for his intended bride. She received the large package and could not restrain her curiosity, so she carefully removed

the outer wrappings. About that time the presents having all been distributed, the superintendent announced that "if everyone now would please be quiet, the minister would come forward and deliver the closing prayer."

The minister began his prayer. But the young lady lifted the lid of the enclosing box and in so doing also lifted the lid of the album, thereby releasing the spring to a little tinkly music box that was concealed in a compartment at the back of the hinge. The minister finished his prayer to the tune of "Ha-Ha-Ha, you and me, Little brown jug don't I love thee."

The first account originally appeared as "Christmas Fifty Years Ago," by an Old Timer, in History of Decatur County, Iowa, and its People, edited by J. M. Howell and Heman C. Smith, vol. 1 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Co., 1915; reprinted 1981), 222-24. The second account describes the 1890s, perhaps near Newton, Iowa; it is excerpted from "Christmas Echoes and Reminiscences" by Mrs. R. A. Poage, in Annals of Iowa, vol. 32 (1955), 496-506.