

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVI

ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1935

No. 12

COPYRIGHT 1935 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



Christmas in Iowa

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to Men!

If Longfellow could have visited Iowa on Christmas Eve in 1934 he would have heard the ringing church bells proclaim the refrain of his poem. Christmas is a religious festival, and everywhere in Iowa — in city and town and snow-clad countryside — churches were observing the holiday with special programs. Christmas hymns were sung with enthusiasm, staid congregations drowning out their choirs on favorite tunes. Groups of carolers roamed about singing Yuletide songs: choral societies rendered stirring oratorios. Those who were unable to attend church "listened in". The joyous spirit associated with the birth of the Prince of Peace pervaded the country.

Iowans had good cause for rejoicing on Christ-

mas Eve in 1934. Four lean, depression years had taxed their courage and sorely tried their spiritual faith. Suffering and even starvation had threatened many who had never experienced want. The economic morass seemed less perilous. Convincing evidence of better times was the Christmas trade. When the last belated purchases had been made, tired clerks found that their holiday sales had greatly increased. It was generally conceded that 1934 had been the most bounteous Christmas in four years. The butcher had sold more turkeys, the grocer more cranberries. Confectioners rejoiced over the heavy sale of Christmas candy. But best of all, youthful Iowans had made frequent visits to the toy shops and took their choice of an amazing variety of animals, dolls, dishes and drums, doll houses and doll buggies, books, chairs, cradles, miniature pianos, mechanical sets, electric trains, stream-lined automobiles, airplanes, dirigibles, and sturdy tin soldiers. To cap it all the ovens of many Iowans emitted the smell of roast fowl for the first time in several years.

Weary postmen, staggering under the heavy loads of Christmas cheer, could attest to an increase of business. Packages cluttered postoffices and railroad terminals despite warnings to mail gifts early. It was the Christmas Card, which

originated in England in 1846 but did not become a distinct feature of the American Christmas until 1900, that proved to be the most popular of all. For example, 246,900 pieces of first class mail passed through the Iowa City post-office in the eight days preceding Christmas. The peak was reached on December 20th when 50,000 letters and cards were cancelled — the overwhelming majority being Christmas greetings. By December 24th this number had dropped to 12,700.

The spirit of Christmas in Iowa was exhibited in many ways. The poor were remembered with special gifts of food and clothing: at Dubuque one club distributed 240 baskets of food to needy families while another served turkey dinners with all the trimmings to lonely, homeless individuals. Estill Holt, living near Bloomfield, had been stricken with infantile paralysis and removed to Warm Springs, Georgia, for treatment. His heart was gladdened on Christmas by a surprise visit of his wife and small son, a reunion made possible by an unknown sympathizer. Good cheer was evidenced in hospitals everywhere. Chicken and mince pie were served at several State institutions and roast pork at the penitentiary. CCC boys stationed near their homes were granted a five day Christmas vacation with the folks.

Home has always been the festive center dur-

ing the Yuletide season. So it was in 1934 when children and grandchildren came by bus, by train, by airplane, but mostly in streamlined automobiles over paved highways to gather around the family board. For Christmas belongs to the children and everything revolves about their happiness.

Let us turn back the pages of Iowa history and try to catch some fleeting glimpses of the pioneer Christmas of yesteryears. The first white settlers in Iowa celebrated Christmas in an era when there were no railroads or airplanes, no paved roads or streamlined automobiles. It is easier now for Iowans to cross the State than for the pioneers to visit kinfolk a dozen miles away. A generation passed before the first railroad reached Iowa and another before the main trunk lines had crossed the State. A scant ten thousand people could be found sprinkled along the eastern border of Iowa in 1836. In 1870 the frontier line still clung tenaciously to the northwestern counties of Iowa.

Individuals and communities varied in their mode of celebrating Christmas according to their national, regional, or religious heritage. The Scandinavians, the Dutch, and the Germans, introduced St. Nicholas or Santa Claus. "Kriss Kringle will be here on next Wednesday, very early in the morning", observed the editor of the *Sioux City Weekly Times* on December 21, 1872.

The Germans introduced the Christmas tree with its toys, trinkets, figures of angels, and numerous little lighted tapers. In 1874 the Belle Plaine *Union* reported the Turnverein Ball on Christmas Eve as a jolly affair: the following year it noted that the Lutheran Church would put up a German Christmas tree. The first American settlers in Iowa brought with them the customs of their particular nationality or region. As these traditions took root they were modified to suit conditions.

The typical Christmas in early Iowa was a simple event when measured by modern standards. The pioneer shot or trapped his wild game in the forest, often gladly sharing it with some less fortunate neighbor. An old settler in Boone County recalled going out on Christmas morning in 1856 and bagging three prairie chickens in an hour. What wife today would trust her husband's prowess as a hunter on such short notice. The pioneer wife in turn was adept at converting the raw materials at her disposal into a wholesome, bounteous repast. A blazing fire, plenty of food, popcorn and candy, interspersed with songs and stories, did much to spread good cheer.

Such simple pioneer celebrations often left an indelible impression upon the participants. Thus, in 1924 Mrs. Mary Miller, who was born in Clinton County in 1837, described the first Christ-

mas she could remember. This was in 1842, only nine years after the white settlers entered the Black Hawk Purchase and four years before Iowa achieved Statehood. Her home was a log cabin erected in a clearing near the Mississippi on the present site of Clinton, Iowa. A soft blanket of snow covered the ground outside when the children prepared to retire. "We all hung up our stockings on Christmas eve", Mrs. Miller recalled. "Next morning we were gleeful at finding in each stocking a nice fat brown doughnut and some pieces of gaily colored calico. I was very happy because I knew that my elder sister would make and dress a rag doll for me, just like the one with which she played."

Breakfast over the children bundled up and scampered outside to play in the snow, for the busy mother needed plenty of room to prepare the Christmas feast. Game was plentiful and the father had no difficulty shooting a huge wild turkey in the woods. Maple sap had been gathered on an island in the Mississippi and a plentiful supply of sugar cakes delighted all. The frugal housewife baked mince pies in her Dutch oven. The berries had been gathered in the summer and dried. The home-rendered lard for the crust was crisp, white, and flaky. As Mrs. Miller related: "After we had stuffed ourselves with turkey and

roast venison and roast pork, potatoes, nuts and maple sugar, we sat in front of the fireplace and listened to stories. They were stories of other Christmas days, way off in Indiana, from which my father and mother had come in an ox cart."

Toys were almost unknown among the pioneer children. Some home-made practical gift with perhaps an apple or cooky was sufficient to cause a youngster's heart to leap in joyful appreciation. This was true particularly with poor families or those far removed from settled areas. Children in the larger towns had a better opportunity to profit from the generosity of Santa Claus. The *Ottumwa Copper Head* of December 22, 1870, contained the following gentle reminder to its readers: "Al. Bonney, of the Post Office News Depot, has received and has now for sale all kinds of Christmas toys for the little folks, such as dolls — yes dolls that actually open and shut their eyes; horses, carriages, locomotives, trains of cars, jumping-jacks, boys picture books, little girl's books; good boy's annuals, chess men, checker boards, trumpets, (such as you can blow and frighten nervous people with,) and in fact all kinds of toys, suitable for the holidays."

A resident of Madison County remembered with what keen anticipation the pioneer children awaited the welcome greeting "Christmas gift",

which all good children could expect to hear on Christmas morn. "How eagerly we looked forward to the day just preceding Christmas, when father came from town with the bulging pockets, and the mysterious packages being tucked away from our prying eyes until the eventful day. Our impatience could scarcely be curbed until that glad Christmas morning, when the contents of those mysterious packages had been mysteriously transferred to our stockings. And then the joy of scrambling out of bed in the dim, gray light of Christmas morning".

Another resident of Madison County believed the Christmas spirit was as hearty among the pioneers as it is now. "Our Christmas was very different from the children of to-day. But I believe what was given us gave us as much pleasure and was of lasting benefit to us. We were not taught to believe in Santa Claus, but on Christmas eve, mother would tell us the stories of The Babe in the Manger, The Star in the East and The Visit of the Wise Men. Next morning, she would be awake first and would wish a 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,' and often we would find an apple or a stick of candy in our stockings and some needed article like mittens of her own knitting, handkerchief, slate pencil or other practical gift."

Religion was indeed an important element in the pioneer's Christmas. The Cumberland Presbyterian Sabbath School at Nevada held a joyous Christmas Eve festival in 1863. The little folks attacked the sweetmeats and cake with gusto, but were taken home at an early hour, deeply regretting that Christmas did not come every day. The *Corydon Monitor* of December 19, 1868, announced that the young ladies of the Methodist Church were preparing a fair and supper for Christmas Eve, the proceeds of which were to purchase a Sabbath School library. At Winterset the Methodists assembled around a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve in 1874. The same year the three Sabbath Schools at Belle Plaine celebrated Christmas Eve with handsome yule trees: Anna Bell got a gold watch and chain off the Methodist tree. The Christmas tree of the academy at Blainstown was proclaimed a grand success.

Three generations of Iowans have found an ever-increasing number of club, lodge, school, community, and society programs to attract their interest and participation at Christmas time. Lectures and concerts, dances and parties, all have formed a part of the early Christmas celebrations. The *Sioux City Weekly Times* of December 21, 1872, announced that Professor Nickle, the "world renowned illusionist", would give a

Christmas Day matinee of his "wonderful art". The professor planned to distribute "a large variety of valuable presents" to those holding the lucky tickets. A family of six could gain admission for one dollar. In 1874 a pioneer supper was held at the Kirkwood House in Winterset and a matinee performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was presented on Christmas Day at the opera house.

Some there are who decry the spirit which now carries young folks away from the family circle at Christmas. Our pioneer forebears, however, were not always found chained to their hearthstone. In 1857 some of the younger set in Hamilton County drove a four-horse sleigh from Saratoga to Rose Grove for a Christmas Eve dance. Near Kamrar they were set on by a pack of a hundred prairie wolves and coyotes but reached Rose Grove in safety. The perils of the wintry prairie were soon forgotten in the whirls of the dance. "At twelve o'clock", one of the merrymakers related, "our landlord called us to supper. The meal consisted of deer, elk and buffalo meat, corn bread baked on an iron griddle, fried cakes and pumpkin pie. After doing it ample justice we danced on till morning. Elisha Hill lost his heart and one of old man Lakin's daughters got it, but she said even exchange was no robbery for he had her's too, and she gave him her hand. The wind did blow and

the snow drifted and filled our tracks, and it was bitter cold the next day when we ate our breakfast and started for home. Our bill for the fun we had, was one dollar per couple."

But dances on Christmas Eve were not always so propitious. In 1874 the *Belle Plaine Union* recorded that the Christmas party at Irving in Tama County was "broken up by fights and rowdyism". The landlord of the Irving House was fined twenty dollars and promptly threatened to make the rioters pay the damages.

The pioneers of Boone County had a unique way of celebrating Christmas. On Christmas Eve a number of men would get together, elect one of their number captain, and set out to visit many of the homes in the neighborhood. "On arriving at a house," an eye-witness related, "the captain would call out the name of the owner in a stentorian voice and then order his men to fire. The noise produced shook the house and reverberated among the hills. When the noise subsided the man of the house would open the door and invite the men to come in. His hospitality was accepted with pleasure, and there were hand shakings and congratulations, joking and laughter. The good woman of the house would then set out pies and cakes and serve warm coffee, which was partaken of with a relish."

The merry company would then reload their guns and set out for the next house. Sometimes upon departing some one would start a familiar hymn and all of them would join in singing it. Again the party might call upon a home where a small group was gathered for devotional purposes. On such occasions the men would tarry for a while, get down on their knees when prayer was offered, and join in the singing. These visits were kept up until midnight, when Christmas was ushered in and the men returned to their homes.

The spirit of Christmas may be gleaned from the yellow files of almost any Iowa newspaper. In 1860 the editors of the *Winterset Madisonian* observed: "Turkey dinners seemed to be the order of the day, and judging others by ourselves, we have no doubt but that ample justice was done, both to the occasion and to the turkeys. We feel like joining in a petition to congress to enact that Christmas shall be observed at least twice a year." The Civil War produced a sober note in the Christmas spirit. "A year ago", the Story County (Nevada) *Aegis* of December 23, 1863, declared, "Christmas saw many a friend by our social boards, now manfully facing the foe, or sleeping the sleep that knows no waking. May the next anniversary see this cruel war ended and peace, prosperity and friends restored."

By 1865 the Winterset *Madisonian* echoed a cheerier note as the editor reported that a "veritable gentleman" named Santa Claus had distributed gifts through the post-office to every one for miles about Winterset. Four years later it printed a rumor stating a "real live Santa Claus, dressed in fur and trimmed with wagons, whistles, candies, pop guns, wheel barrows, etc." would put in his appearance on Christmas Eve before the Baptist Sunday School. "We'll be there with our stockings", the editor promised. That same year, 1869, Santa Claus appeared as auctioneer at Dunkle's store, allowing customers to "make their own selections and take them at their own prices."

Most Iowans view with regret the absence of snow on Christmas. In 1934 the eastern portion of Iowa was blanketed with snow but the weather was moderate, ranging from 20° above zero at Charles City to 40° above at Sioux City. Towns along the Mississippi received the most snow, Davenport heading the list with a fall of two inches. Pioneers relate how the snow used to cover fences and cabins. Graphic accounts have come down of the hardships encountered on the prairies of Iowa and the dangers of being lost in a blizzard. "Christmas day in 1856 was ushered in by a fog", a pioneer of Boone County related. "For nearly a month the ground has been covered

with a deep snow. A heavy sleet had fallen two weeks before and crusted the ice until it would easily carry a man running at full speed on skates but would not bear the weight of a team. Our wood pile grew smaller each day until we began to make anxious calculations as to how much longer it would last. The severity of the winter compelled us to keep a fire day and night and a light was kept burning in an upstairs window for the benefit of some possible belated traveler."

Cold waves and blizzards were not always a Christmas feature, however. "Has Our Climate Changed?" queried the editor of the *Winterset Madisonian* on December 26, 1872. The editorial continued at some length on the mild winter and fortified its conclusions by quoting the *Good Health Magazine*. "We do not have those continual piercing and sharp winds that made our winters so very severe a few years ago. Our climate is getting more and more friendly." The editor of the *Sioux City Weekly Times* also lamented the absence of snow in 1872. "It promises to be dull here, in the way of amusements, during the holidays", he wailed. "The absence of snow, no doubt is the cause of it. Christmas is no more like Christmas without sleighing than Fourth of July is like New Year's." But Sioux Citians must have their fun at Christmas time and the editor

observed that "racing oxen in the streets is all the rage now."

Sometimes the mild weather prompted editors to speak out of turn. "Who ever saw a finer winter?" than the December of 1874. "Here it is almost New Year and no cold weather yet. (P. S. — Tuesday. We take part of this back.)"

A colorful picture of a pioneer Christmas in Davis County has been left by Dillon H. Payne in the *Bloomfield Republican* for December 23, 1926. It was Christmas Eve, the chores had been done, the meal concluded, and while the mother and elder daughter washed the dishes, the rest of the family gathered around the fireplace to hear the father reminisce about Christmas back in Old Virginia. Two neighboring young folks arrived, covered with snow, to join the family in their Christmas festivities. Such hilarious games as Blindman's Buff and Who's Got the Button elicited joyous shouts from the youngsters. Then a breathing spell was taken during which large quantities of "apples, nuts and popcorn" rapidly disappeared. More games were played and then the crowd repaired to the kitchen for the taffy pull. Thus the hours passed merrily and the clock on the mantel struck twelve, the visitors donned their wraps and bolted out into the thick falling snow, amid cries of Merry Christmas.

Before retiring the entire family gathered around the blazing fireplace. The father took up the family Bible and read a Christmas lesson. Then all knelt in a prayer of praise and thankfulness, closing with "Peace on earth, good will to men." Before being tucked in their trundle beds the children hung their stockings on the mantel. With the first streak of dawn on the eastern horizon, the sleep of all was disturbed by calls of "Merry Christmas" and "Christmas gift". The whole family was quickly astir as the youngsters scampered for their stockings. Their joy was complete when they found that Santa Claus had not forgotten them.

Outdoors the drifted snow held no terrors. The trees were festooned in white and the clouds scattered before the rising sun. The wind had ceased to roar around the gables and the snow flakes no longer fell, or sifted through the roof and unplastered walls. Thus was ushered in the happiest day of the year. Merry Christmas!

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN