



The Victorian Holiday Season

by Loren N. Horton

FOR THOSE IOWANS who celebrate Christmas and New Year's, many of today's holiday customs are still colored by the richness and elegance of the Victorian era. Historical accounts of how many nineteenth-century Iowans celebrated these holidays reflect customs first practiced in Victorian England and then dictated by books

of etiquette and household hints widely available in America.

Just as many of today's holiday customs are derived from Victorian customs, the customs of the Victorian era were derived from earlier practices dating back to pagan and early Christian celebrations. Mid-winter and the solstice were common times to celebrate the anticipa-

In Victorian fashion, greenery bedecks the parlor of Farm House Museum at Iowa State University in Ames. Each December the house is decorated for the public (open Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, noon to four).

COURTESY IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS (ISU PHOTO SERVICE)

tion of springtime, the return of light, and the renewal of life. Common elements of these pagan celebrations include feasting, drinking, singing, giving gifts, decorating with greenery such as evergreens, mistletoe, and holly, and using candles and torches. As Christianity spread throughout Europe in the first centuries A.D., the Church, in trying to gain converts, deliberately tried to join its holidays with pagan holidays by adopting many of these symbols and customs. These practices evolved through the centuries, despite abolition of certain customs by the Puritans in seventeenth-century England.

The common need for people to hearken back to simpler, more secure times during periods of change may help explain why the Victorians themselves seemed to dwell on Christmas, holding on to old customs. When Queen Victoria began her reign in 1837, England was undergoing a great transition. It was changing from a rural to a predominantly urban society, with different work patterns brought on by technological advances of the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, the English middle class was also drawn to imitate the behavior of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, charismatic symbols of English family life. Thus, family-centered events were popular.

CHRISTMAS during the Victorian era (circa 1840 to 1905) was a popular and greatly publicized event, in America as in England. (Therefore, a wealth of historical evidence is available for study.) The Victorians placed great importance on displaying what one owned; this conspicuous consumption contributed to the sense of excess and abundance in holiday decor and activities. Christmas was also a common focus of literary and artistic expression. Nineteenth-century Iowans would have seen Christmas celebrations as the subject of Currier and Ives lithographs, and in calendar art produced by the Thomas D. Murphy Company in Red Oak,

Iowa. They would have read long, descriptive passages about family-centered Christmases in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Charles Dickens's novels and serials, Washington Irving's short stories, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poems.

Victorian customs were most common in America among people of English heritage and those who aspired to the behavior dictated in etiquette books. In turn, these customs were reprinted in mainstream magazines and publications, and thus were dispersed among various ethnic groups. Iowans would have read variations of this etiquette in the many books of household hints then published, such as *Collier's Cyclopaedia of Practical Knowledge*, which dispensed etiquette along with household hints, recipes, and medicinal advice. As manuals of proper Victorian behavior, etiquette books were tradition-bearers, not trend-setters. Because of this, we see in such books descriptions of seventeenth-century customs, such as the Yule Log, which was probably practiced only by the more old-fashioned or tradition-bound Victorian families, not by all nineteenth-century families. The sense of doing what's socially proper, of following tradition, of feeling secure in one's family probably helped establish Victorian customs as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century concept of Christmas.

FORMALITY and ceremony attended many Victorian holiday activities. Etiquette prescribed that in the late afternoon of December 24, the season was opened with the ceremonial lighting of the Yule Log, often from a piece remaining from last year's Yule Log. A symbol of hospitality and warmth, the Yule Log was to be kept burning on the hearth until midnight on January 6 to mark the friendliness of the household to visitors.

According to etiquette, the church bells would next be rung, and then either the head of the household or the youngest female would light the Yule Candle from the now-flaming log, and place the candle in the middle of the dining table. Then everyone drank a festive beverage, perhaps frumenty, posset, lambswool, wassail, whipcoll, mead, syllabub,



“Christmas without its evergreens,” claimed an 1866 *American Agriculturist*, “would lose half its holiday charms.” Above: Evergreen market, as sketched in that magazine. Opposite: diagrams from another issue.

mulled wine, or mulled cider. A whole cheese was placed on the table, a cross scraped on the top of it, and good wishes exchanged. The Christmas Supper, the first major food feast of the holiday season, could now begin.

Victorians celebrated the holidays with much feasting, and the unusual names and excessive amounts may seem strange to us now. Many Victorians often consumed large quantities of alcoholic beverages, especially during ceremonial times. In fact, drunkenness was a serious social and health problem among all classes in nineteenth-century England. Liquor was also common on the American frontier during settlement of Iowa. (Accounts of Fourth of July celebrations during pioneer times include many, many toasts. The toasts were not offered in water.)

In studying the Victorian era, we must understand that Christmas and New Year's customs were common to the middle classes, many of the upper classes, and some of the lower classes. But poorer people would have had a hard time keeping warm and fed, without extra money to spend on luxuries such as holiday decorations and special food and drink.

DECORATING HOUSES was widely practiced during the Victorian holiday season. As a public display of personal wealth, a family would hang wreaths and garlands in windows facing the road or street. Ropes and boughs of evergreens were draped over windows, door frames, picture frames, chandeliers, newel posts, balusters, and other interior woodwork. Over the dining rooms of the more affluent, a ball or bell of evergreens was suspended, with ropes of greenery or red satin ribbons draped to the corners of the room and hanging down to the table itself. The *American Agriculturist* in 1878 noted that "the chandelier forms a central point for decoration which should be treated with special care. But every farm-house can have some cheerful natural ornament, even if it be but branches of evergreens."

Magazines printed instructions and diagrams for making decorations on a "frame work of lath or twigs, and covered with some kind of green. These are formed into crosses, stars,



Fig. 1.—DESIGN FOR TRIMMING A ROOM.



Fig. 2.—TO DECORATE A CORNICE OR DOORWAY.

and other devices," one article explained in 1866. "Some of the wreaths, etc., are prettily decorated with bright berries, while others, to meet a cruder taste, are made gaudy with flowers cut from brightly colored paper." Victorians also used ferns, ivy, holly, mistletoe, moss, sumac, bittersweet, dried flowers and leaves, cattails, grain, cockscomb, strawflowers, gourds, and pine cones in their decorations.

To take advantage of the decorations and other preparations in private homes, the Victorians often scheduled other social activities, such as weddings, christenings, dinners, balls, and reunions, during the holiday season. For instance, in 1879 in Sioux City, Iowa, Bert F. Winslow and Victoria C. Cole were married at home on Christmas evening. In Burlington in 1872, six hundred attended a ball for the Burlington Division of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in a hall "tastefully decorated with evergreens and pictures; and festooned with flags and ribbons."

Greenery also appeared in the churches, in time for the Christmas Eve services. "The ancient custom of decorating churches is becoming more general yearly," observed an 1878 *American Agriculturist*. The *Sioux City Daily Journal* in 1880 prefaced a list of Christmas Eve church services with this: "So soon as the twilight comes to-day, Christmas is going to be inaugurated for children. Christmas trees have been planted in many places, and their growth and . . . abundance in beauty, light and gifts will be shown to-night." For a German Lutheran church in Sioux City, in 1881, "no



good-sized Christmas tree could be found in the market [so] the two largest that could be procured had been spliced together so neatly that few noticed. . . . On this the little presents for 100 little Sunday-school kinder were placed." Other Sioux City churches featured a boat "heavily freighted with gifts," or a "Jacob's ladder" wrapped in white cotton with evergreens and tapers. Santa often appeared during the services to distribute gifts to the children.

CHRISTMAS TREES had become common symbols of the holidays by the end of the century. Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, has often been credited for introducing the Christmas tree to England, but actually the custom had been brought from German areas of Europe by King George I of the Hanover family in the early eighteenth century. The English did not admire their Hanoverian kings, however, so they did not then imitate the custom.

The idea of Christmas trees became popular in the public mind after the *Illustrated London News* in 1848 published an engraving of the Royal Family gathered around a Christmas tree at Windsor Castle. Because Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had created such a popular image of the Royal Family, the Christmas tree became an accepted symbol of family life and solidarity. The same illustration was reprinted in American magazines (with adaptations, as shown here), and the custom became common.

It is quite likely that Christmas trees were used in the United States before 1850, but probably only by Germanic and Scandinavian families (whose ethnic traditions had derived from pre-Christian use of evergreens in mid-winter celebrations). No etiquette books include advice about Christmas trees until after this popularization in about 1850. Apparently the use of Christmas trees by the Royal Family in England lent a stamp of respectability upon the matter for the hopefully upwardly mobile American nouveau riche.

In 1879 a writer for the *American Agriculturist* commented that "within the last twenty years [the Christmas tree] has grown from very small beginnings, and spread itself wonderfully in this country, until of late its



(Opposite) The Royal Family around the Christmas tree, depicted in the *Illustrated London News*, 1848. (Above) American magazines adapted the engraving: Albert became a bewhiskered American, without royal sash. American portraits hung on the walls, and flags on the tree.

popularity appears to be somewhat on the wane. . . . In some families, the same decorations and ornaments are kept and used from year to year, and very pretty effects are produced by the arrangement of the dolls, soldiers, horses, and other animals about the grounds underneath the tree, where bits of looking-glass simulate water and where flowers seem to grow among the moss."

Victorian Christmas trees stood on a table, not on the floor. They were decorated with candles, small baskets filled with candy and nuts, gingerbread cookies, egg-shaped containers filled with candy, and paper ornaments in the shape of snowflakes, flowers, and hearts. Beneath the tree there might be a white cloth, with a crèche or a miniature farm scene. Later in the century, cornucopias, paper chains, and strings of cranberries became common tree decorations.

Victorians set up and decorated their Christmas trees at the start of the holiday season, December 24, and took them down after January 6, or Epiphany (also called Twelfth Night or Little Christmas). The tree was in the parlor, and this room was closed off from the rest of the

house until Christmas morning. A grand ceremony of opening the parlor door on Christmas morning showed off the decorated and lighted tree for the first time.

GIFTS were ordinarily given on Christmas morning after breakfast, although some might be saved until afternoon tea. The gifts were often placed on a separate table in the parlor, not under the tree. Historians of the Victorian era have imperfect records about whether everyone opened their gifts at the same time, in turn, or in what particular order. The major documentation available is of what happened in Queen Victoria's household, and she apparently always got to open her gifts first.

Gifts were less a part of the Victorian Christmas than they are today. Early gifts tended to fit into three categories: needlework; items made of silver; and foods, such as preserves, candy, fruits, nuts, and cakes. Fashion magazines such as *Godey's* or *Ballou's* recommended appropriate gifts for Christmas, such as handmade doilies, picture frames, fans, tea balls and strainers, vases, ornamental boxes, sachets, plush photograph albums, pin cushions, watch cases, and annuals (special publications sold only at Christmas time). Those attending an 1872 Montgomery County, Iowa, community festival exchanged gifts of tea pots, dolls, clothing, hand-made toys, lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, pin cushions, and jack knives.

Although toys for children were always acceptable gifts, they were not emphasized. The tradition of a gift-bearing man existed among various ethnic groups, but was not rooted in Victorian customs. Gradually these ethnic variations (Sinter-Klaas, Kris Kringle, St. Nicholas, and so on) were Americanized into a fat, jolly "Santa Claus" with reindeer.

CHRISTMAS DAY MENUS surely satisfied the appetite of the hungriest person. A typical menu might include such items as roast beef, roast goose, ham, oysters, potatoes, turnips, parsnips, beets, stuffing (made of celery, oysters, chestnuts, or sage and onions), fresh fruit, nuts, pickles, plum pudding and sauce, minced

meat pies, lemon tarts, meringues, jams and jellies, bread, butter, and beverages. Accounts of Christmas meals in Iowa reflect a similar abundance. James Lonsdale Broderick, a Yorkshireman who visited Dubuque in 1876 and 1877 noted on Christmas Eve, 1876: "We dined with Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Woodward, off pork, potatoes, pies, peaches preserved from Ohio, pickles, butter, green tea, &c." On Christmas Day that year he fared as well, and observed this about American dining habits: "We dined off roast turkey and oyster sauce, pie, &c. It is surprising where all the turkeys are raised that are eaten here, and the chickens. The beef about Dubuque is very inferior with scarcely any fat upon it. The people here won't buy fat meat, and when they do, they make the butcher take it off. . . . When one dines with the Americans they give one all kinds of eatables and nearly all at once, filling the plate as long as it will hold anything. At the Hotels a man orders everything that he imagines he can eat, and they are all placed before him at once. He is then compelled to eat very quickly or some of his dainties would get cold. Is it not better to have things served up in succession, just as required, and to take a little more time? Of course the Americans live well, on three meals a day, with butcher's meat to every meal, in other words, they live upon three dinners a day."

An account survives of an 1869 Christmas in Decatur County, Iowa. It was a community "festible" held in a schoolhouse. Among the food served was roast beef, ham, turkey, cucumbers, beets, and pickled eggs, piccalilli, "cold" slaw, jelly tarts, preserves (made of crabapple, tomato, ground cherry, plum, wild strawberry, watermelon, and citron), seven varieties of pie (including vinegar pie), sugar-coated rusks, golden crulls, and several kinds of cake.

Baskets of feather flowers in bright hues decorated the tables at the Decatur County event. At an earlier Christmas program at the school, the Christmas tree was not an evergreen, but a crabapple tree, trimmed with colored paper and tissue-paper snowballs. Students received a silver-paper basket filled with nuts and candy from their teachers. Other gifts exchanged that day included sugar apples, china doll heads,



By Victorian practice, the Christmas tree sat on a parlor table and was first seen on Christmas morning.



A rush of callers welcomes the new year in this illustration from *Harper's Weekly* (January 1, 1859).

perfume, bottles of hair oil, and candy hearts.

Chauncey C. Horton, a school teacher in Highland Grove, Jones County, Iowa, boarded with a local family. He reported for Christmas Day, 1861: "Have fared exceeding well to day, as the folks have *killed* and *cooked a Turkey*, it being Christmas." In general, though, his board was much less than satisfactory: "It would be strange, if we did not meet one good streak in the course of two weeks or more. Yet we anxiously wait the time when we shall take our departure from this inhospitable place; and may the Furies seize E. F. if he ever get us into another place like this illbegotten hole." Christmas Day was celebrated sparingly in the neighborhood; Horton held classes at two schoolhouses that day. He also reported that on the day after Christmas, "we are paying for the good time yesterday, for we have made a dinner out of chunks and scraps which were thrown overboard from the Ark."

As a contrast to Horton's ill luck at the dinner table, we might read in wonder a Victorian recipe for Christmas Pie. Ingredients include a goose, a fowl, a partridge, a pigeon, a hare, woodcocks, and other game and available wild fowl. The smallest fowl is tucked inside the next largest, and so on, and all this is enclosed in a good standing crust with a thick wall and bottom. The recipe calls for four pounds of butter and a bushel of flour.

(For more on holiday eating and recipes, see page 204.)

BECAUSE NEW YEAR'S was more of a social event than the family-centered Christmas celebrations, New Year's customs are more likely to have been reported in local newspapers, and descriptions of Victorian customs appear often. Dinner parties and balls were often held on New Year's Eve, with elaborate menus featuring desserts.

On the afternoon and evening of New Year's Day, it was the custom to call on friends, or to be home so friends could call on you. This was either by invitation or as an open house. Light food was usually served, sometimes there were entertainments and dancing, and often there were special decorations. Each person apparently tried to call on as many others as possible.

The more you called on the better, and the more who called on you the better.

There was a great use of calling cards. On December 26, 1882, the *Daily Iowa State Leader* announced an "unlimited" assortment of New Year's calling cards. "No other printing concern in town will be able to make any such showing," the paper boasted. "Our styles run the scale from the costliest to the plain white card, and we guarantee to suit the most fastidious blood as well as the bashful student."

Actually the person calling might only leave a card at the front door, and never see the hostess at all. Both men and women called and were called on, but ordinarily it was men who called on women in their homes.

One could go calling as an individual or in groups. James Lonsdale Broderick, in Dubuque in 1877 noted: "The Gentlemen in parties of from 3 to 6 went round as is customary here on New Years' day to make calls upon the ladies who gathered themselves in companies of from 3 to 6. On calling, they, each party, exchanged cards on which are printed their names and 'A Happy New Year'. . . . We had some music, reading, and riddles."

As early as 1833, Captain Thomas Hamilton in his book *Men and Manners in America* stated: "It is the custom in New York, on the first day of the year, for the gentlemen to visit all their acquaintances; and the omission of this observance in regard to any particular family, would be considered as a decided slight. . . . For my own part, I confess, I found the custom rather inconvenient, there being about thirty families, whose attentions rendered such an acknowledgment indispensable. . . . In the course of about four hours [I] had the satisfaction of believing that I had discharged my duty. . . . You enter, shake hands, are seated, talk for a minute or two on the topics of the day, then hurry off as fast as you can. Wine and cake are on the table, of which each visitor is invited to partake." According to Captain Hamilton, the first day of the New Year was considered a day of kindness and reconciliation. All petty differences were to be forgotten and trifling injuries forgiven.

An 1870 etiquette book gives precise instructions for New Year's Day: calls are made exclusively by men, formal wear is required, a

stay should be very short, cards are to be used, and refreshments are served. "The politest of receivers of a visit, if of the female sex, are not expected to do more than bow the head, say a gracious word or two of farewell, and ring the bell for the servant to open the street-door on the departure of a male guest." Furthermore, "discreet visitors, ever mindful of the suggestive line—'Welcome the coming, and haste the departing guest' will linger as little as possible *in transitu* from door to door."

In spite of these somewhat inhospitable instructions, people seemed to have enjoyed this sort of activity. The *Iowa State Register* on January 1, 1885, listed the location of seventeen "open houses" that day in Des Moines, some with as many as thirty-three ladies as co-hostesses. "Colored Society open houses" are also listed. In the fashion of the time, ladies are not identified by their own names, but rather by their husbands', thereby creating such interesting names as Mrs. Judge C.C. Cole, Mrs. Captain Russell, Mrs. Dr. Cruttenden, Mrs. Major Conger, Mrs. General Alexander, Mrs. Rev. Van Antwerp, and Mrs. Lieutenant Governor Manning.

On January 2, 1885, the Des Moines newspaper reported that the previous day had been perfect weather for calling and that the decorations were beautiful. One "new and beautiful home was most handsomely decorated with evergreen and other material. Over the large plate-glass mirror in the entrance to the house was the word 'Welcome' and the year '1885'. . . . Each caller was presented with pretty souvenirs made by the ladies who received with Mrs. Harding. They were cards on which was printed the full names of all the ladies. To them was fastened fine ribbons on which were original paintings by the ladies. The reception here as in most of the other places was by gas light, the house being closed so as to exclude the sunlight. The callers were delighted with music by the Northwestern Band. The lunch was bountiful."

Another home was decorated like a "fairy land" with garlands of cotton, covered with "diamond dust" (probably white or clear glitter), and fastened with Christmas tree moss. Another home had "elaborate" evergreen decorations. "In the archway between the two



A nineteenth-century artist pokes fun at the custom of New Year's Day social calls. One strove to call on as many homes as possible and to stay but a moment. Here, the gentleman arriving presents his checklist of homes to visit, rather than his calling card. Meanwhile, the rushed host has his own calls to make.

parlors a bell was swinging, which rang out the old year and rang in the new. On one side of the bell was '1884' and on the other '1885'. 'Welcome' and 'A Happy New Year' in evergreen, also greeted the callers as they entered the parlors."

The special feature at yet another home was a grab bag filled with trinkets. The newspaper noted that "there was a great deal of fun in making the 'grabs'. There was but one trouble and that was, there were more callers than there were articles and the bag was emptied before the last calls were made."

The Hotel Morgan in Des Moines presented a New Year's game dinner for guests. The menu included clams, salmon, ham, mountain sheep, tongue, turkey, black tail deer, canvasback duck, oysters, rabbit pot pie, ruffed grouse, and fillet of buffalo tenderloin. A variety of sauces, broths, salads, vegetables, cakes, pies, and nuts rounded out the menu — and, no doubt, the diners.

Contrary to the dictates of some etiquette books, gentlemen acted as hosts for New Year's Day open houses in Iowa. On January 1, 1884, in Winterset, four different open houses were hosted by men, in one case by fifty-six gentlemen. The *Winterset Madisonian* reported that one menu would include prunes, hominy, flitch (or bacon), bologna, gingerbread, plum butter, and something called "b. h. hash." The paper announced that "Married ladies [are] especially invited, and the young ladies are earnestly requested not to stay away. Children under the age of twelve months not desired. Husbands and lovers may bring their wives and sweethearts as far as the front gate, but [the men] are strictly forbidden entering."

As early as 1879 the *Osceola Sentinel* reported New Year's open houses. In 1884, the ladies who had been received later described the festivities: "Leap Year Calling. — New Year calling has been one of the pleasantest institutions of Osceola society for many years, and when it was announced that 'Barkis was willin' this year to receive the ladies, the anticipation of a good time was universal. . . . Flags and mottoes were the chief decorations, the motto over the parlor entrance in the hall attracting particular notice from its symbolical character. Here the ladies flocked earliest, may be because the rumor quickly ran around town that every lady here went to the dining room accompanied by a gentleman. The tables were provided with every delicacy possible to provide."

At another open house in Osceola the decorations were even more elaborate. "One piece in particular attracted much notice. A gilt frame enclosing a black velvet background, with gilt figures 188 on its surface. Then two hands extended from a white cloud at one end, one of which held a figure 3 just taken from the date and the other had a 4 almost put in its place. On the cloud a wavy line of gilt letters told the legend 'Time is Fleeting'. Birds and flowers had been brought to add to the beauty of these rooms, and in a lace curtained recess a band was constantly discoursing soft music. Their fare was dainty indeed, and the table with its pyramids of fruit and flowers was like a charmed feast. The bill of fare was dainty and fanciful and witty as ever was devised — a

medly of conceits of various sorts. This club gave each lady a packet of 'bonbons' to take away."

AS THESE EXAMPLES show, New Year's Day calling was a well-established Iowa custom among the middle and upper classes during the decades after the Civil War. Food and decorations seem to have played as major a role in the success of the open houses as they did in Christmas celebrations. Certainly then, like now, some people practiced certain customs without knowing why or understanding their meaning. Apparently Victorian customs, or derivations of them, seemed fitting to those who celebrated Christmas and New Year's in the nineteenth century.

And just as the Victorians had their customs of observing the holiday season, so do the people in Iowa at the end of the twentieth century. Today, outdoor displays of colored lights are quite common before Christmas. Santa Clauses arrive simultaneously at shopping malls. We sing about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Frosty the Snowman. We give gifts of video games and kitchen gadgets. The time for the celebration has changed a bit. We now begin to buy decorations in late October, and extend the holiday through "after-Christmas sales." New Year's celebrations might take the form of an RV trip to the Rose Bowl, or a day with other fans in front of a televised football game. But the holidays remain, as they were in the Victorian era, a time of family gatherings, parties with friends and neighbors, gift giving, decorating, and dining. As the reporter for a Hopeville, Iowa, paper observed about holiday celebrations, "Life needs such hours to lighten it — to remember always — to anticipate." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources include nineteenth-century national magazines, etiquette and household-hint books, and Iowa newspapers. Also see Phil Stong's "Christmas in Iowa," *Palimpsest* (Dec. 1957). For Montgomery County, Iowa, see leaflet by the Montgomery Historical Society, "Christmas in a Country Church" (1989).