



Historical Haves and Have Nots

In a sense, this *Palimpsest* considers Iowa history in terms of the haves and have nots. Starting on page 192, historian Loren Horton looks at holiday celebrations during the Victorian era. For many Americans, an ethic of conspicuous consumption fueled an extravagance of holiday decorating among the upper class and those aspiring to it. Local Iowa newspapers listed extensive menus of holiday meals hosted by the prominent; abundance and excess seemed to be the guiding principle. Our popular conception of Christmas today is often based on the richness and color of the Victorian holidays as documented in historical materials.

Yet, as Horton points out, not everyone in the Victorian era had cause to celebrate. "Poorer people would have had a hard time keeping warm and fed," he writes, "without extra money to spend on luxuries such as holiday decorations and special food and drink."

In nineteenth-century American magazines, the voice of the "have nots" is occasionally heard amidst the more frequent reports of elegant Victorian social events. The above illustration, for instance, accompanies a nine-stanza poem on the front page of the January 1, 1859, *Harper's Weekly*. One stanza reads:

"... It is gay and glorious wine you drink,
I can see it sparkle from here,
As I stand on the pavement, cold and wet,
And wish you a Happy New Year. . . ."

As students of the past, do we base our view of the nineteenth century on the Victorians who celebrated the holidays with wine and fine food, or on the Victorians who stood hungry in the snow? Smithsonian curator Spencer R. Crew reminds us on the next page that all parts of the American experience are essential—not just those of the rich and politically powerful. According to Crew, certain cultural and community groups have felt left out of American history because their past has been overlooked by history. As keepers of the past, historical societies must be sure to collect and interpret the common, everyday objects, used by the "unsung heroes of American history, the construction workers, sailors, servants, miners, and farmworkers."

Yet, we can only exhibit and publish what we collect, and we can only collect what is available to us. Consider this: is your own history available to historical organizations? Try Crew's exercise of imagining a museum exhibit on your family's history. What artifacts and documents are needed to tell your story? Will those objects be passed on to historical organizations, so they can be shared with the public? We wish that this *Palimpsest* could have included accounts of multicultural winter celebrations of the past, but such accounts are rare. If your holidays include the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa, or the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, for instance, how can you help assure that future generations will know about these social customs in Iowa of the 1990s? Will historical institutions possess the artifacts and documents to depict the range of American holidays of the twentieth century? A lot depends on the Americans who currently own those materials.

To celebrate the diversity of ethnic customs still in place in Iowa, we offer folklorist David Brose's colorful photo essay on ethnic traditions. For your own celebrating we've included three Victorian holiday recipes on page 204. And as we approach 1992, the *Palimpsest* wishes our readers an abundant and peaceful new year. As a final note, we direct you to an important question boxed on the inside back cover.

—The Editor