

The
PALIMPSEST

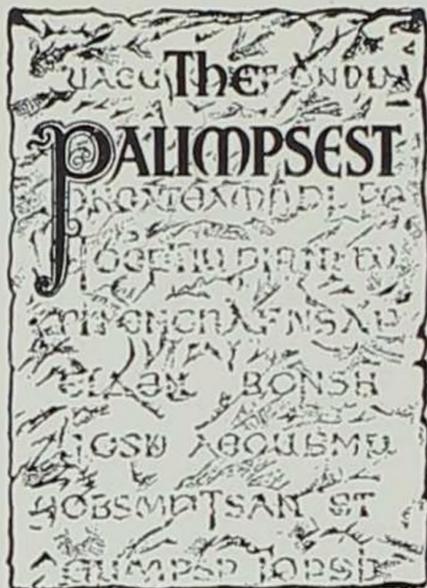


Opening Christmas Presents

CHRISTMAS IN IOWA

Published Monthly by
The State Historical Society of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

DECEMBER 1956



The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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All pictures unless otherwise noted are reproduced from *Harper's Weekly*, Volumes I-XX (1857-1876). "Santa Claus at the Chimney," p. 568, is from the *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk), December 12, 1855.

Back cover pictures, both inside and outside, are replicas of old Christmas cards, some of which are in the possession of the State Historical Society of Iowa and others owned by Mrs. William J. Petersen.

Author

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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT
IOWA CITY IOWA UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

PRICE — 25 cents per copy; \$2.50 per year; free to Members
MEMBERSHIP — By application. Annual Dues \$3.00
ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXVII

ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1956

No. 12

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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!

Longfellow

Christmas is the most important festival in the whole Christian calendar and since the United States is a Christian nation it is without a doubt the most important holiday Americans celebrate. The spirit of Christmas is all-pervading, reaching men of high and low estate. Its foundations are laid in that eternal precept that men should love one another. It commands all Christians to remember the words "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Since the spirit of giving forms its very keystone, merriment and joy are more likely to prevail at Christmas than at any other time.

The story of the birth of Christ is best told in the gospel according to St. Luke. There, simply

but beautifully narrated, we find Christ in the manger, the Star of Bethlehem, the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night, and the Angels appearing in the heavens singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Painters and sculptors, writers of prose and poetry, and famous composers have put forth their best effort to recreate the story of the nativity. The birth of Christ inspired Handel to compose *The Messiah* and set to music Rev. Isaac Watts' "Joy to the World!" It inspired Charles Wesley to write "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!" in 1739, a classic which Mendelssohn set to music in 1840. How Franz Gruber composed "Silent Night, Holy Night" in 1818 is one of the inspiring Christmas stories.

The anniversary of the birth of Christ is likewise the most revered of all Iowa holidays, a fact readily demonstrated by its antiquity as well as its universal popularity. Christmas was observed by the first pioneers in the Black Hawk Purchase. Christmas was one of the first three legal holidays recognized by the General Assembly. It is observed in churches and schools, by lodges and clubs, in town and country, and by relatives and friends around the family hearthstone. It is celebrated by rich and poor, by young and old, by men of all creeds, colors, and nationalities — both native-born and foreign. The Germans of

Amana, the Dutch of Pella and Orange City, the British of Le Mars and the surrounding countryside, the Mennonite communities of Iowa, the Bohemians of Linn and Johnson counties, the Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Germans, and Irish scattered throughout the State, all have contributed something to the observance of Christmas as we know it in Iowa today. The first American settlers in Iowa, whether they came from New England, the Middle Colonies, the South, or the Old Northwest, brought with them the customs and traditions that had prevailed among their friends and relatives back home. The observance of Christmas in Iowa has thus become a blending of the best traditions and customs of the Old World and the New World.

The proper observance of Christmas was recognized by Iowa's pioneer lawmakers. Both the Council and the House of Representatives adjourned for the yuletide holidays in 1838, establishing a custom which was followed by subsequent territorial and state legislative bodies. Thus, on December 25, 1841, the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* (Iowa City) observed:

Agreeably to the resolution previously introduced to that effect, and in accordance with a custom, prevalent we believe in most of the States, the Legislature adjourned over from Wednesday last, until Monday the 3rd of January. Most of the members have availed themselves of the opportunity afforded by the adjournment,

to visit their respective homes; and they are now, we trust, if no accident has happened them, in the midst of their families or friends, and of the enjoyments of the delights of a "merry Christmas."

Apparently the weather fitted the yuletide season as the legislators departed for their homes. According to the *Reporter*:

The cold winds of the winter howl around, and the fields and "pleasant places" of the country lie covered with the ermine of the Snow-King. 'Mid biting blasts o'er treacherous streams and trackless prairies many of our friends have hastened away to meet their families at the "hearth stone" on the Christmas holidays.

The same editor noted that Christmas was more "closely observed" than any other holiday handed down "by our Anglo Saxon progenitors."

This day from being a season of great moral joy and soul-engrossing gratification became in time a day of unbounding hilarity. . . . Many of our religious denominations yet commemorate the day by the observance of public worship, but notwithstanding, this and the all importance of the period of which it is the Anniversary, a large majority of our people esteem it not strictly as a *holy* but a *holiday*. It is made the time of an annual gathering of the scattered members of the household flock, the young man and maiden then return to the homestead, the grandsire renews his age in the frolics of the merry prattlers about his knee, the unkindness of the dying year is forgotten, high hopes are excited for the time to come and all goes "merry as a marriage bell."

Simple though they were, the pioneer Christmas celebrations often left an indelible impression

upon their participants. In 1924, Mrs. Mary Miller, who was born in Clinton County in 1837, described the first Christmas she could remember. This was in 1842, only nine years after the white settlers entered the Black Hawk Purchase and four years before Iowa became a State. Her home was a log cabin erected in a clearing near the Mississippi on the present site of Clinton. A soft blanket of snow covered the ground outside on Christmas Eve. "We all hung up our stockings," 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 had no difficulty shooting a large wild turkey in the woods. Maple sap had been gathered on an island in the Mississippi. 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."

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 today. 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."

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. According to an eye-witness:

On arriving at a house 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.

Not all Iowans hovered around the family hearthstone on Christmas Day. Coasting, skat-

ing, and sleigh riding attracted many youngsters and not a few of their elders. Hunting had its devotees on Christmas Day. Dances and balls were frequently given on Christmas night and many gay young folks could be found in attendance. 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 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. . . . 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."

Christmas dances became so commonplace during the yuletide season that they sometimes interfered with the normal flow of business. On December 27, 1851, the editor of the *Western American* at Keosauqua lamented apologetically:

Balls, parties, etc., have so occupied the attention of the good looking Printers in our Office, as to render it impossible for us to publish a paper next week. When

they get their frolic out, we shall resume the "even tenor of our way" — wiser, we hope, for what we have learned, and better prepared for the duties and responsibilities that await us.

We tender the compliments of the season to our patrons, with the fond hope that each and all may live to enjoy many a merry Christmas and happy New Year!

On December 23, 1869, the Marshall County *Times* (Marshalltown) reported a "Christmas Ball" as follows: "Lovers of Fancy Dances are cordially invited to attend a social ball at Rice's Hall, Monday evening, Dec. 27th. Music by Gerhart's Band. — Supper and refreshments served in the Hall. Admittance for gent and lady, including supper, \$3." On January 1, 1869, the same paper reported a Christmas party at Albion in Marshall County.

John Hinman, the gentlemanly and enterprising proprietor of the Albion Hotel, gave the "young folks" of that vicinity a choice treat in the way of a Dancing Party on Christmas Eve. Everything went off merrily and in good order and all the participants were "more than pleased." Fifty-three couples were present. Mr. Wm. Thrall gives us the item.

In 1873 the Estherville *Vindicator* observed that the accommodating School Board had agreed to allow the dancers of the community to give a grand Christmas Ball in the new school building on the evening of December 25. The "knowing ones" planned to make the occasion the "best and most entertaining" ever held in Estherville. The

"best of music" had been secured and a Christmas supper would be "dished up" for the occasion. According to the *Vindicator*:

Mr. G. M. Haskins, the popular landlord of the Estherville House, has kindly consented to "do his prettiest," as he always does, on such occasions, and get up a supper for the dancers at the Christmas ball. Those who have partaken of the bountiful repasts that Mr. H. spreads upon his boards need no guarantee as to the character of this one. Tickets \$1.00, and the best attention "thrown in."

In 1864 some of the "young bloods" of Iowa City seemed "quite far gone with congestion of the brain" and a local editor hoped they would "wake up better and wiser men." In Appanoose County in 1847 a party of "boys" drank themselves into oblivion on Christmas Day. During the night they slept on buffalo robes and deer skins placed on the muddy tavern floor. The weather turned cold and the following morning each "reveler" was "snugly frozen to his earthen bed" and had to be "thawed out" before returning to his home.

In the larger towns Iowans frequently enjoyed a performance at the local theater or opera house on Christmas Day. Professor Nickle, the "world renowned illusionist," gave a Christmas Day matinee of his "wonderful art" to Sioux Citians in 1872. A family of six could gain admission for only one dollar. A "large variety of valuable

presents" were given those holding the lucky tickets. In 1874 a matinee performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was presented on Christmas Day at the opera house in Winterset. Apparently it was a fairly common practice to offer special inducements to Iowans to leave the family hearth on Christmas Day. On December 31, 1891, the *Fort Dodge Messenger* declared: "At the Christmas matinee at the opera house George Brownell won the first prize of \$3 offered to the person handing in the longest list of words made out of the letters in the name 'May Bretonne.' The number of words was 520. Maud Patterson was second on the list with 506 words. Tom Farrell captured the children's prize with 300 and odd words."

As the population of Iowa grew and congregations became well established, Christmas church services featured Sunday school programs — children singing Christmas songs, giving recitations, and portraying through pageantry the story of the nativity. At McGregor in 1863 the editor of the *North Iowa Times* made the rounds of the churches. He found the Baptist building filled with happy children and interested adults enjoying the Christmas music and plays. Three "elegant" Christmas trees loaded with presents for the scholars and teachers adorned the brick Congregational Church. The singing and recitations were "exceedingly well done" and the editor only

regretted he lacked space to name the "little orators and oratresses." Another fine tree loaded with presents was the center of admiration for "anxious little eyes" at the German church where singing was in order. At the altar were replicas of Christ in the manger and the shepherds.

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. 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. In 1874 three Sabbath schools at Belle Plaine celebrated Christmas Eve with handsome yule trees and Anna Bell got a gold watch and chain off the Methodist tree.

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 also introduced the Christmas tree with its toys, trinkets, figures of angels, and numerous little light tapers.

At Anamosa in 1872 the arrival of Santa Claus at the Congregational Church was kept a secret from young and old alike, the committee in charge stressing the rendering of "The Shepherds" as the main feature. After this play there was more singing, and then came the unexpected event of the evening, "the arrival of jolly old Saint Nicholas, and that, too, in a big sleigh drawn by a golden caparisoned deer, with lofty antlers and shining eyes, and circled with jingling sleigh-bells. Out clambered Santa Claus with his North Pole snowshoes and shaggy coat, and made fast his beautiful steed to a convenient post. The children, and the old folks as well, were completely taken by surprise, for this part of the programme had very happily been kept a profound secret by those who had the matter in hand, and so the surprise was as complete as it was delightful."

Such tactics did not always have the desired effect. At an Onslow church in 1873 the unexpected arrival of Santa Claus caused the little folks to become "somewhat frightened." Santa accordingly made a short stay and the youngsters were soon quieted when the presents were distributed to the many waiting and anxious ones who were made happy and went away rejoicing.

Santa Claus had become so well entrenched in the hearts and minds of most Iowans by the close of the Civil War that mature folks firmly opposed any deviation from the pattern laid down by the

Rev. Clement C. Moore. In 1873 a citizen of New Hartford, Iowa, expressed his opposition to any modernizing of Santa Claus, particularly when he appeared as an "aristocratic gentleman of red-tape proclivities who with white kids, and immaculate shirt bosom, smiles benignly on the ladies, and daintily passes the presents from the tree to the eager expectants. No, this modern Santa is not ours; ours is fat, and merry, and sooty. His shirt bosom won't bear inspection, neither are his pants *a la mode*. His medium circumference directly after dinner, exceeds his altitude at noonday."

Long before the dawn of the twentieth century the Christmas tree had become a chief center of the yuletide festival. Beautifully festooned with shimmering tinsel and sparkling icicles, girdled with endless strings of popcorn, cranberries, and paper chains, bedecked with colorful many-hued globes, prisms, reflectors, and other decorations, surrounded by a multitude of presents for all good boys and girls, the Christmas tree, lighted by flickering candles, served as a magnet for all to come and gaze upon. Farmers often bundled their families in their sleds and drove to town to see a Christmas tree. What Iowan cannot recall the following scene described by an Oskaloosa editor who visited the Congregational and United Presbyterian tree at the City Hall?

Christmas trees covered all over with beautiful presents, and streaming with light from hundreds of wax candles, made the scene resplendent with beauty and intensely interesting.

As the Superintendent read off the names of the scholars as marked on the presents, they rose in their seats and signified their presence, when the presents were carried to them and their little hearts swelled with love and happiness in thus recognizing the affectionate care and kindness of parents and teachers. The Superintendents and Pastors of the churches were not forgotten.

Presents of all kinds from a paper of pop-corn to a cast-iron bootjack — were distributed, amidst the very height of enjoyment.

Music also had a part in Christmas observance. The pioneers of the Black Hawk Purchase enjoyed singing such old favorites as "Joy to the World!," "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and "Silent Night, Holy Night." Mendelssohn composed the music to "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" in 1840; "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" appeared in 1850, and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" appeared soon after the close of the Civil War. By 1896 all these songs and many more besides were played on the chimes of St. Paul's Episcopal Church at Des Moines. They were equally popular in other church musical programs.

Once the church services were over and the presents distributed from the stockings or the Yule tree, Christmas was devoted largely to family reunions. The spirit of the old-fashioned

Christmas reunion has been caught by Currier and Ives. Thousands of Iowans who have grown up on the farm can recall with pleasure how the entire family was packed in the big sled and carried off swiftly to grandpa and grandma. Sometimes these family reunions were very large, fully seventy young and old being present at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Calkins at Clare in Webster County in 1887.

In 1896 a resident of What Cheer recounted how fifty years previously she had been "sandwiched" in with the rest of the family and driven off so fast she thought the "trees and fences were moving" and not the sleigh. "We were there at last and amidst kissing and handshaking are hurried in to the great hickory wood fire, wraps taken off and we children warming ourselves, with a huge ginger cake in each hand. Sleigh after sleigh unloaded. Soon all are there when in comes Auntie with a basket of nuts and down go the children on the hearth to crack and eat them." The highlight of the day occurred when the children were called to partake of a Christmas dinner that was never forgotten.

The Christmas at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Shaffer in 1890 was most enjoyable because of the element of surprise. They were intending to eat roast turkey with their son Harry, but before they were ready to depart from home, they were greatly surprised to see all their children ar-



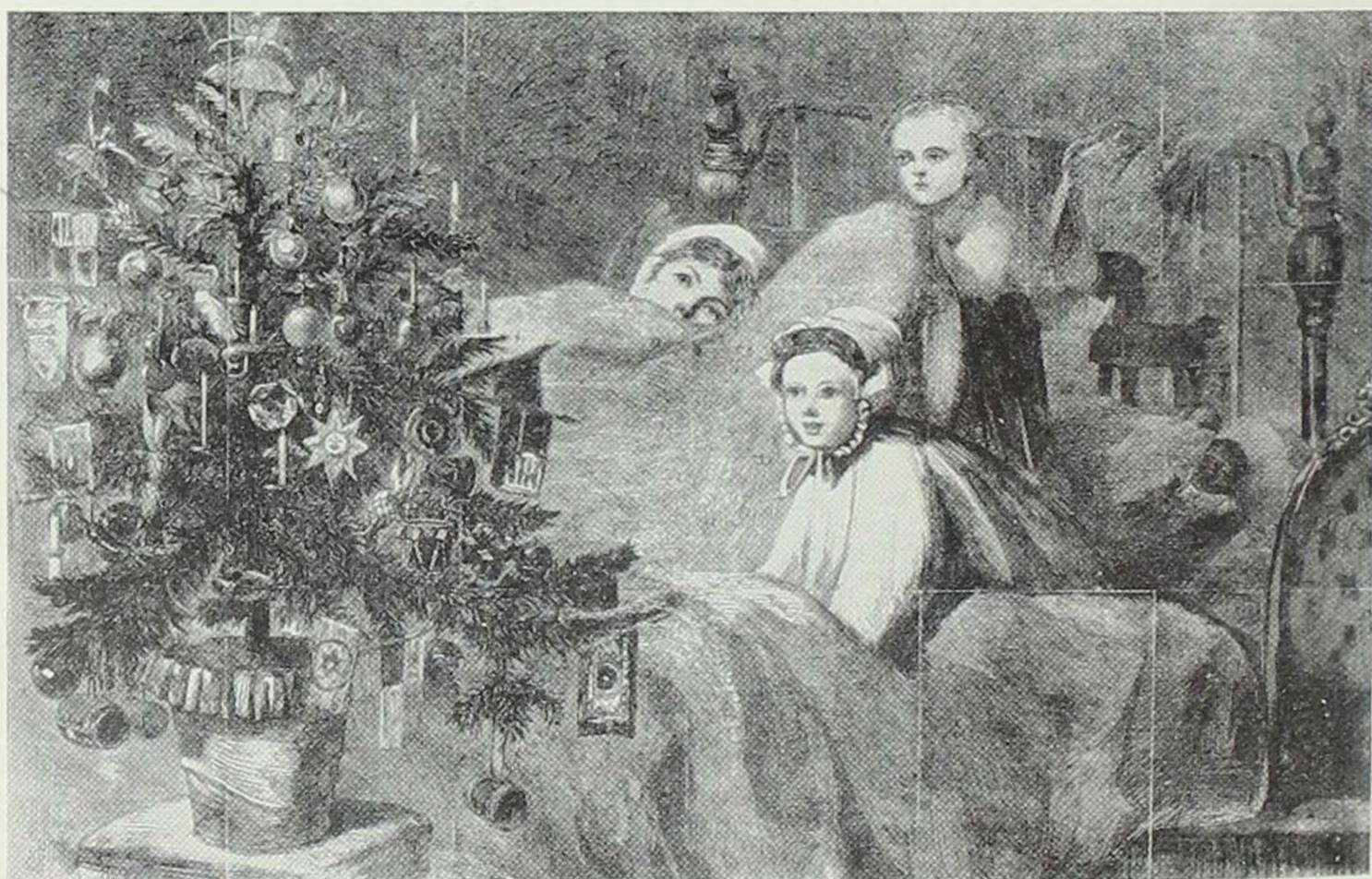
Gathering Evergreens



Hauling Home the Christmas Boughs



An Old-Fashioned Santa Claus



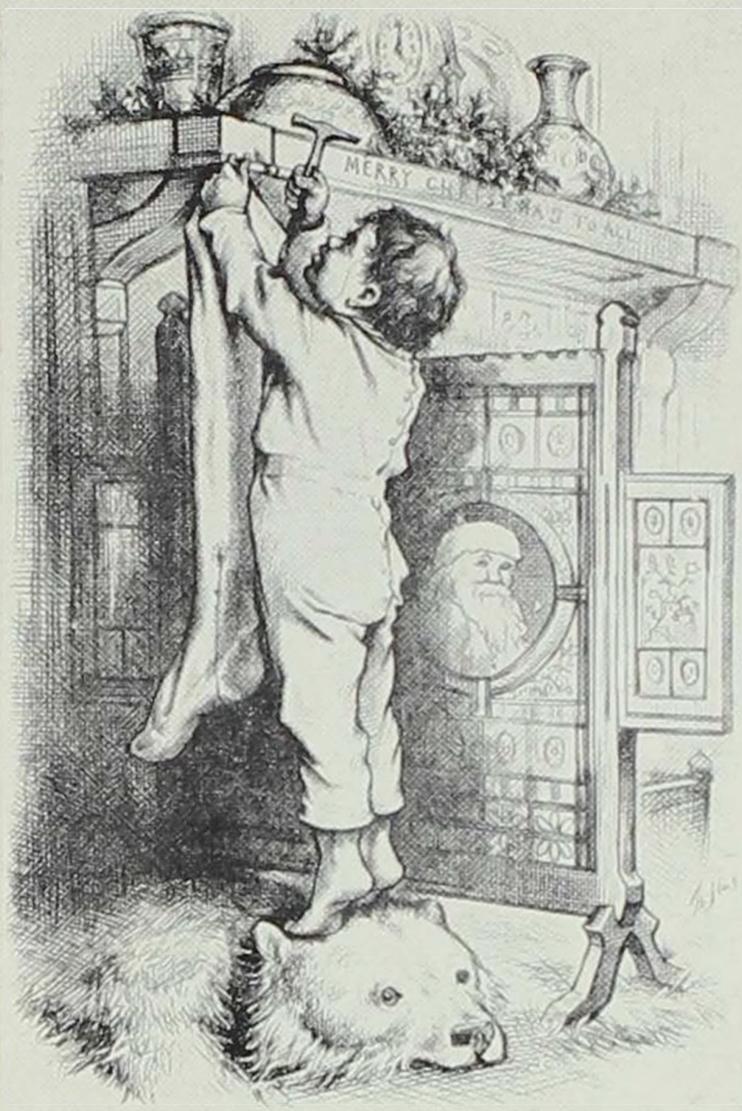
Christmas Morning



An Early Morning Call



Around the Christmas-Tree

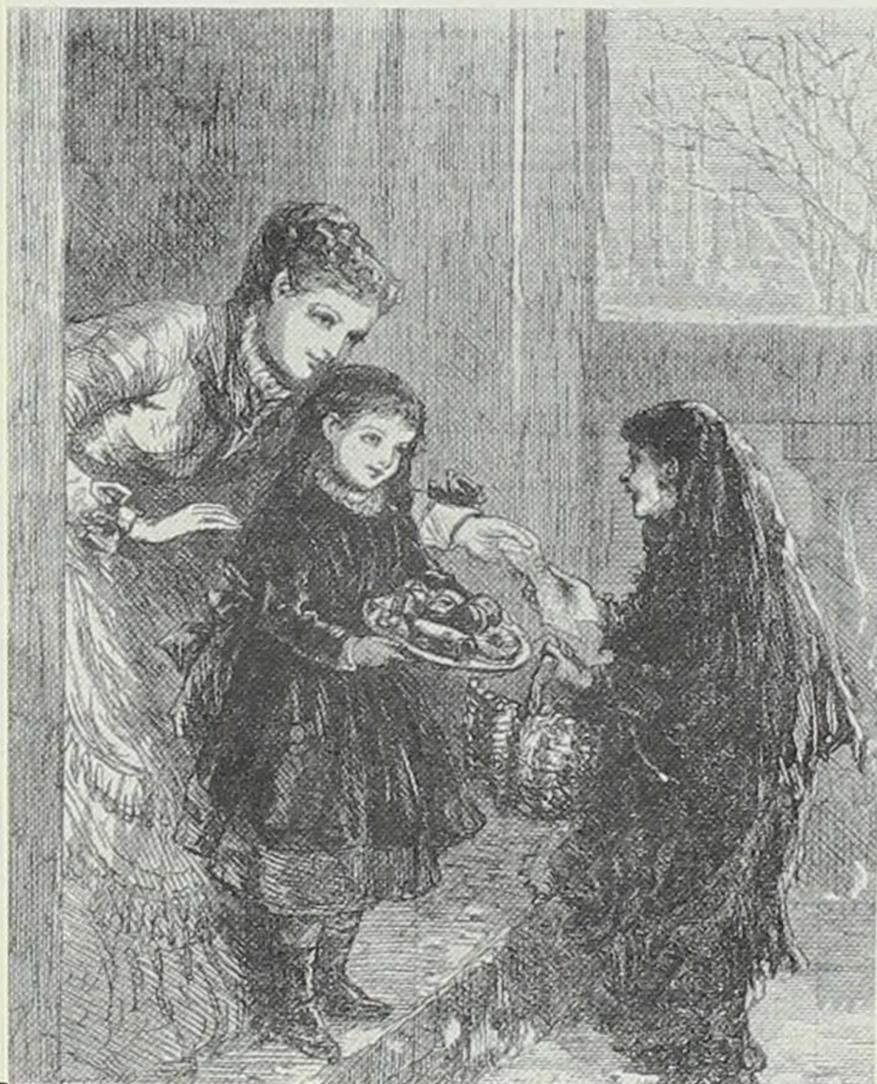


"'Twas the Night before Christmas"

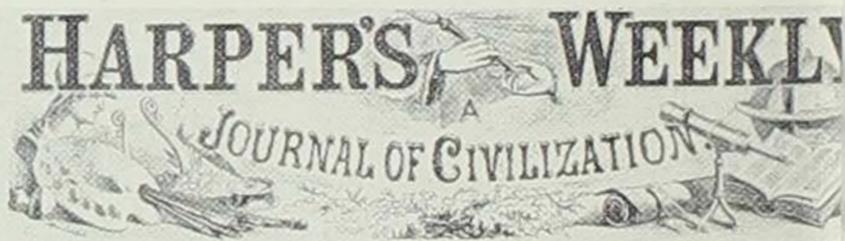


Christmas Carols

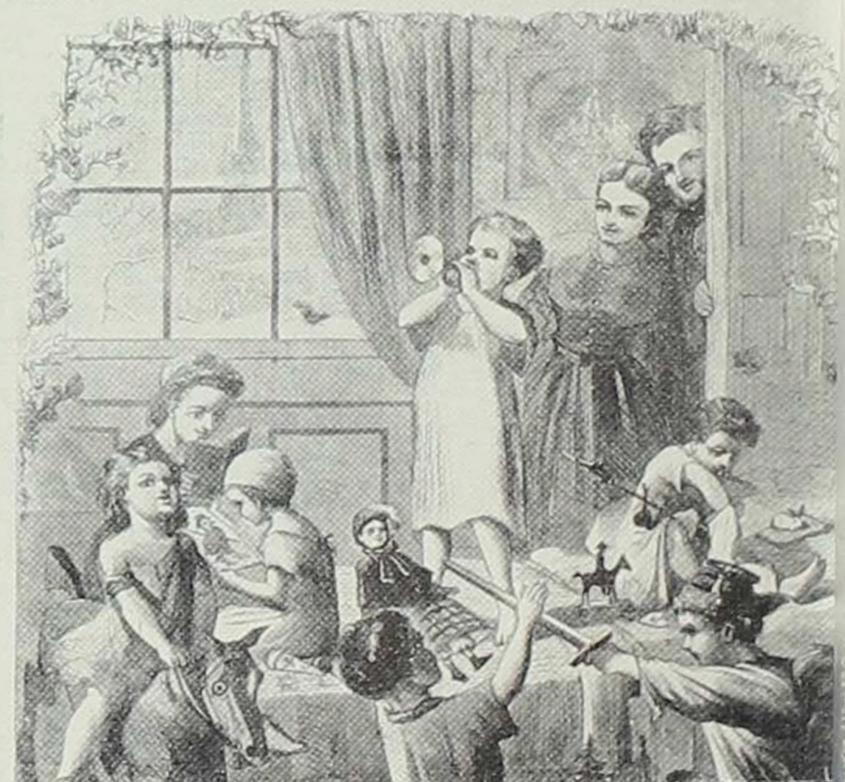
The Poor Were Not Forgotten



Christmas Morning



V. VIII.—No. 418.] NEW YORK, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1884. [CONTAINS 12 PAGES.]



rive with baskets filled with good things. "The girls took possession of the kitchen. The parents were left to enjoy themselves in the parlor until dinner time. Promptly at one o'clock they were invited into the dining room, where the sons presented the father with a nice fur coat, and the daughters presented the mother with a beautiful hanging lamp, after which they sat down to a bountiful Christmas dinner" including roast turkey, vegetables, cakes, pies, sauces, and other eatables. After dinner the little folks had a good time eating popcorn, candy, and peanuts.

But there was more to Christmas than eating and receiving gifts; the spirit of Christmas giving was taught early to the youth of Iowa. In 1872 the Congregational children in Anamosa loaded "sundry packages of clothing, chickens, apples, sacks of flour, &c." into "capacious sleds" and whirled them away to the homes of the needy. "This," a local editor declared, "afforded genuine enjoyment to all — the givers, if possible, more than the recipients."

Newspapers were not slow to remind the more fortunate that the poor must not be forgotten at Christmas time. On December 21, 1872, the *Sioux City Weekly Times* declared: "We hope some effort will be made to induce Santa Claus to visit the children of our poor, while making his rounds on Christmas eve."

In Marshalltown the editor of the *Times* an-

nounced on December 19, 1868, that a local citizen had agreed to give six poor families each a Christmas turkey. Readers were asked to turn in the names of deserving families and the more "benevolently disposed" were urged to remember the poor with similar donations. The campaign apparently spread far beyond the families of the poor, as the following report in the *Times* of December 30, 1869, attests:

The genial sun of our Merry Christmas, or perhaps his own warm and liberal heart, started our friend Judge [G. M.?] Woodbury into the poultry market, and when he was once under motion he hardly knows where to stop. — All the printers, editors and ex-editors of *The Times*, the Cashier and clerks in the Bank, the city clergymen, including Father Dunton, and we know not how many others, each received from him a fat gobbler for their Christmas Dinner. We are desired by this deserving and grateful crowd to return him a hearty vote of thanks. — May he be spared a thousand years, and always continue as able to disperse such liberal blessings as at present. That is the prayer of *The Times* boys — as we presume it is of the balance of the remembered.

The gift of a fat turkey or other wild fowl to an appreciative pioneer editor was a common practice. On December 26, 1872, the editor of the *Anamosa Eureka* declared:

Our innermost thanks are duly tendered to Watters Bros. for a fat and tender turkey for our Christmas dinner. We can fully testify, from an internal consciousness, that this gallinaceous bird, "done brown," and supplied with all the interior and exterior accompaniments, is just

as good a center dish for the family board as can be found between the two oceans. We are sure that the fragrant memories of that brown coated young gobbler, as he lay in solemn state, will attend us many days — even until our royal Santa Claus shall again thus pleasantly remind us of the advent of another Christmas Day!

Such gifts were not always limited to a lone editor or a few newspaper men, bankers, and ministers. On December 25, 1890, the *Fort Dodge Messenger* noted: "The Iowa Plaster Company bought out the entire supply of turkeys in one butcher shop and very nearly cleaned out another this morning. The birds were Christmas remembrances from the company to employees, no one being forgotten."

Iowans did not forget the families of soldiers during Civil War days. The *Anamosa Eureka* of January 1, 1863, chronicled two Christmas parties — the first designed to aid the families of Union soldiers on the home front and the second to help the United States Sanitary Commission.

The Odd Fellows' Ball and Festival on Christmas night proved a very fine affair. The evening was mild and pleasant. The rooms of the Odd Fellows were well filled. The dancing commenced early in the City Hall, and the supper room — in Metcalf's new brick building just east of the post-office — was filled again and again, some four hundred in all partaking of the rich and well supplied tables. The receipts amounted to about \$175, leaving more than \$150 in cash to be distributed among the needy families of soldiers.

We hear incidentally that the Festival at Bowen's Prairie, on the evening of the 23rd, was very successful, that the house of Asa C. Bowen, where it was held, was a perfect jam, there being some four hundred persons present. The people there always do up such things in good style and are entitled to all praise. The object was to aid the Sanitary Commission. We had hoped to receive an account of the affair for this week's issue but as yet none has reached us, owing, probably, to the snow blockade.

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."

The Civil War over, Iowa and the Nation faced Reconstruction and the economic disturbances that were especially grievous on the agricultural frontier. Many Iowa communities, large and small, felt the stifling effects of these recessions. At Fort Dodge in 1890 the Methodist Episcopal Sunday School received a practical lesson in the precept "It is more blessed to give than to receive." All members were requested to bring some offering, no matter how small, to be given to the poor. An apple, or even a potato would do, but everyone was expected to do something — and some of the older pupils and classes promised

and did something substantial. The children entered into the plan with a thorough appreciation of the good it would do. A mammoth evergreen arch was erected instead of the usual Christmas tree and the church was handsomely decorated. The school as a whole received a substantial present in the shape of \$75 worth of books.

In 1896 a little girl wrote the Des Moines postmaster expressing hope that the letter carriers would not pass her by while remembering others liberally. In response to this plea Postmaster Hunter ordered his carriers to seek out the needy. He originally planned to give toys but so many requests came in for shoes, clothing, hats, and underclothing, as well as groceries, coal, and other staples that plans were promptly changed. Des Moines responded heartily by distributing 470 pounds of candy, 100 pounds of nuts, \$40 worth of groceries, 1 dozen turkeys, 10 tons of coal, 200 pairs of shoes, a dozen pairs of boots, 25 boys' suits, 12 boys' overcoats, 10 dozen boys' caps, 12 girls' cloaks, 10 dozen girls' hoods, 500 yards of woolen dress goods, \$20 worth of children's books and toys, and sundry suspenders, neckties and handkerchiefs. As a general thing, Postmaster Hunter pointed out, the gifts had not come from the very wealthy, but from the men and women of medium means — "men and women whose hearts have not yet outgrown the longings and the sufferings of the poor. But that

is always the way in this world." The editor was inclined to agree that Christmas offered men the best chance to reveal their better natures. "On this day we do not strive to get into heaven; we strive rather to make this day and this earth a heaven. . . . this happiest and holiest morning in all the year."

Most present-day Iowans associate Christmas as a time for busy shoppers to wrack their brains for appropriate gifts. This is not a new problem. In 1851 Davenporters were advised that gift books appearing under such titles as *Snow Flake*, *Friendship's Offering*, *Gift of Friendship*, *Amaranth*, *Hyacinth*, and *Remembrancer*, could be purchased. The works of famous poets could be bought in fancy bindings. Then there were writing desks, work boxes, portfolios, card cases, porte moneys, and dressing cases. Children would be delighted with such India rubber toys as balls, rattles, animals, and dolls' heads. Games included backgammon boards, dominoes, dissecting pictures (jig saw puzzles), and the celebrated game of Tivola. Gold pens, silver pencils, papier-mâché folios, paint boxes, and glass paper-weights were suggested. Egg boilers could be bought at especially low prices.

Guitars and melodeons were recommended for the ladies while flutes, fifes, accordions, and violins were suggested for men with musical tastes. Smith's Variety Store advertised gold breast pins

and finger rings, butter knives and silver thimbles, bouquet holders and glass dishes, perfume boxes and pocket books. The stock of fancy purses, fans, landscapes, soaps, and dress goods was excellent while hair brushes, vest chains, medallions, gum toys, and a great variety of ribbons, handkerchiefs, muffs, and boas were also available. Advertisers were always given strong support by the press. In 1863 the *Anamosa Eureka* advised folks who wished to buy presents to visit Dr. Skinner's Drug Store, Wilcox's, Alderman & Williams', Webb's, Hollenbeck's, and Wurzbacher's. In 1874 this same paper advertised "tons of tempting toys to tickle troops of tender hearted toy-smashers at L. O. Gale's."

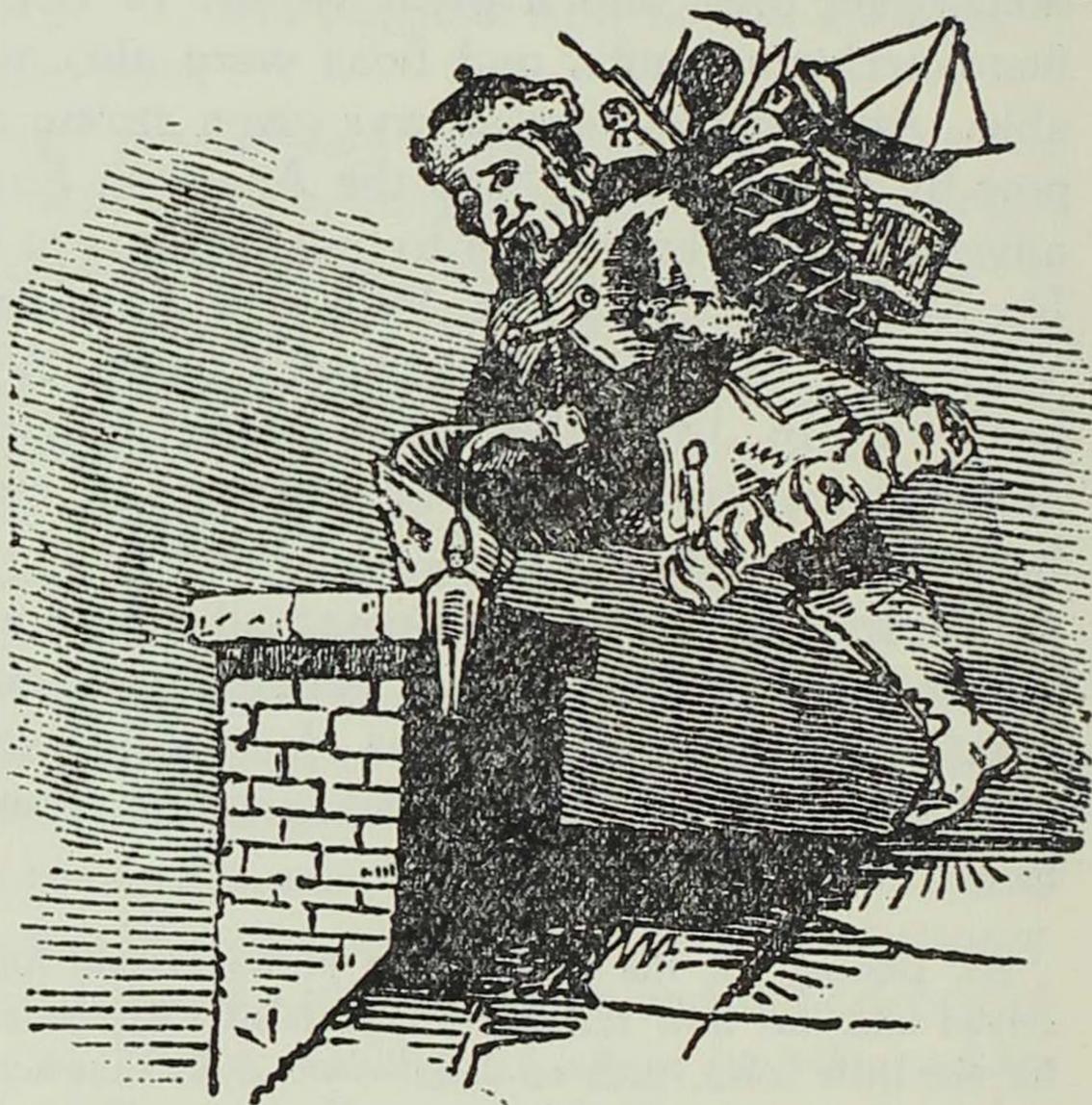
Children in the larger towns had a better opportunity to profit from the generosity of Santa Claus. The *Ottumwa Copper Head* of December 22, 1870, contained the following gentle reminder to its readers:

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.

Possibly the earliest Iowa Christmas cartoon

entitled "Christmas is Coming" appeared in the Keokuk *Daily Gate City* of December 12, 1855.

Christmas is Coming!



EVERY thing suitable for Holiday presents can
be had at the
SANTA CLAUS DEPOT
of **CREIGHTON & OHMER.**
dec 12d

A Council Bluffs editor urged his readers in

1864 to purchase Christmas presents at the Post-office Book Store. "Hopper has a large variety of presents," the editor declared, "but we call particular attention to his superb stock of Albums, which are unsurpassed for beauty and style in any city, and are just such presents as any young gent ought to present to his 'Lady fair.' "

The Iowa Falls *Sentinel* urged its readers in 1873 to patronize local merchants and not be taken in by the "Shoddy" men who were attempting to reap a harvest in the Christmas trade. "At this season of the year peddlers infest our towns, offering their goods at prices that seem far below the regular prices of our merchants. When you take into account the swindles that have been perpetrated by these tramps, the robberies, the shams and trickery that people have suffered through them, it is a simple matter of economy and judgment to turn them away and patronize your home merchants. We do not believe it right to pay cash to tramping peddlers and let your merchants wait on you for goods he has sold you on credit. Be just to them, patronize your home traders and you will be better off and run no risk of being taken in and done for some of these days."

Window displays came to be features of the Christmas trade. In 1890 the *Clinton Age* reported that Swirles Brothers had two fine show windows that attracted crowds all Saturday afternoon. The west window had Santa Claus at

work at the fireplace. The east window contained a snow scene down which boys and girls coasted on sleds and toboggans in rapid and continuous succession. Occasionally a giant spider or a small animal would take a slide in front of the kodaks. Another Clinton merchant, C. E. Armstrong, had a circle railroad on which a little alcohol steam engine pulled a train of cars around, "puffing and snorting true to life, occasionally jumping the track, also true to life." Morey created a sensation in advertising by staging a fine display of fireworks that attracted immense throngs on Saturday night. The following Monday he gave away free popcorn to all the children who came to see his toys. Howes Bros. had a revolving Christmas tree and were searching diligently for a Santa Claus. "Will some patriarch step to the front at 50 cents a day?"

Delighted with the enthusiasm and spirit of merchants and people alike a Clinton editor wrote:

It is said that in some parts of Asia, where Christmas was once observed, the custom is dying out. No reason is assigned. Can it be because the priests and missionaries are striving to make it a holy day instead of a holiday?

On this continent Christmas is observed more generally than any other holiday of the year. While some of the churches have religious exercises on this day, yet there is little or no influence in the pulpit to have the day considered purely for religious observance. . . .

There ought to be one holiday a month. A day when all business would be suspended, and the whole country take an outing.

That this festive spirit was abroad throughout Iowa could be easily demonstrated. There were many similarities in the Clinton and Fort Dodge holiday seasons of 1890. Both had special railroad rates, shoppers to Fort Dodge getting round-trip fares for only half the regular price on the Minneapolis and St. Louis, and the church societies served hot meals to the busy throngs that jammed the streets. Farmers shopping in Fort Dodge were invited to enjoy the fine New England dinner at Fessler's Opera House given by the Congregational ladies. A charge of 25 cents a plate was made for a repast including roast turkey, chicken pie, boiled ham, baked beans, brown bread, pumpkin pie, mince pie, apple pie, coffee, etc. The dinner was hailed a "big success" when the receipts were announced as \$41. Suppers were also served, and "real" oysters could be ordered all evening. The homemade candy and holiday goods offered for sale at "before the-McKinley-bill prices" kept throngs of shoppers milling around the Opera House all evening. A stage program consisting of vocal and piano solos, a recitation by Miss Dolliver, and plantation melodies by a popular colored quartet afforded entertainment to many tired shoppers.

Some idea of the place of the farmer in this.

Christmas bustle may be gathered from a dispatch from the Dubuque *Times* dated December 24th, 1896.

There was a splendid trade with the retail merchants every day thus far, but yesterday broke the record for a steady, heavy trade all day. The city buyers were out in full force, and the number was greatly increased by hundreds of farmers, who came in swarms from all parts of the country. Over 150 teams crossed the high bridge from Wisconsin and Illinois, all loaded with dressed hogs, poultry or some other products of the farm, which they sold. The other roads leading into the city were also lined with teams, and the farmers came in to buy goods, as they filled the stores and were seen going out with their wagons loaded with goods. A reporter for the *Times* made a tour of the big dry goods stores during the afternoon and found it almost impossible to gain admission, so great was the jam. The cash baskets kept up a hum as they were sent to and fro with bundles, and wagon loads of bundles were laid aside for later delivery. The same condition existed in the toy and notion stores, and with such another day today Dubuque merchants will have no reason to complain about a poor Christmas trade.

The custom of sending Christmas cards to one's friends originated in England during the 1840's but developed slowly because of the cost of printing cards. The custom had become extremely popular by the 1860's and spread to the United States in the late seventies when Marcus Ward & Company of London supplied the trade.

L. Prang and Co. of Boston printed his first

Christmas card in 1874. It was issued in England only, but it was so popular he began printing for the American trade in 1875. For a score of years Prang supplied most of the world's fine greeting cards, his chief competitors in an artistic sense were Raphael Tuck and Marcus Ward of England. Many of these copyrighted imports were received in Iowa and are still cherished by families because of their unusual quality. Other popular copyrighted Christmas cards were those of Hildesheimer & Faulkner, some of which were "Designed in England, Printed in Germany." Most of these cards used such motifs as flowers, birds, and kittens. Sometimes they appeared in the shape of an artist's palette or a horseshoe. The more elaborate were four-page folded silken-fringed booklets with beautiful pictures on all four sides.

In the years that followed, Christmas cards became increasingly popular in the United States. In 1944 over a half million letters and cards, mostly Christmas greetings, were run through the Iowa City post office cancelling machine in the two weeks preceding Christmas. In 1955 this number had increased to nearly a million between December 11th and December 24th.

As early as 1890 the Fort Dodge *Messenger* of December 25th noted that the "holiday boom" had struck the United States mails and prophesied that for the next week the "mail clerks will be the

hardest worked men in the county." The Christmas rush in Iowa post offices rose to even higher levels when Congress inaugurated the parcel post service on January 1, 1913, chiefly because of its benefits to the rural sections. What Iowan has not stood in line at Christmas time to mail his Christmas presents? To avoid this congestion the Post Office Department endeavored with marked success to school the public in mailing Christmas packages early. In 1944 Iowans were meeting a mid-October deadline to ship presents overseas.

Newspaper editors frequently commented on the importance of Christmas — not only as a season of rest from the ordinary cares of the world and commercial activity, but also because of its social and religious significance. As early as 1838 a Dubuque editor emphasized the significance of the "sacred and hallowed" birth of Christ. Christmas, this editor declared, brought back to memory the joyous days of youth.

It carries us to our first recollection of its observance as a holiday: — it is the magic that re-enacts the scenes of earlier days — that unlocks the sepulchre, and calls forth the dead to assume their part in that play of life. But it brings hilarity of feeling; sectarian prejudice is forgotten, the distinction of wealth silenced — and all join in the wish of — "A Merry Christmas."

After tracing briefly the history of the "festal day" through Roman and medieval times, a Keokuk editor urged readers to observe Christmas in

1873 as best might please them — whether in forms of worship, in prayer and mass and song, or in a more social observance.

We Americans, have, as a nation, entirely too few holidays. We are too much a money-getting people, and we allow our passion for speedy riches to absorb us so much that a day of social pleasure seems to us to be a day of loss. We should in this respect imitate our English cousins. They remember that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and so all over England on Christmas Day, in hall and in cottage, in palace and hovel, in town and in country, rings out the sound of merriment and good cheer. . . .

Let Americans take one day, at least, of the three hundred and sixty-five, from the service of the almighty dollar, and devote it to the family, and our word for it, they will feel none the worse for the seeming sacrifice. Let them make home bright and pleasant, fill the stockings of the little ones heaping full of candies and nuts, and remember the older members with gifts. The presents need not be costly, but whatever they are, let them be given with gracious word and kind look, and that one day's happiness will compensate for many gloomy ones in the after year.

We are a fast people and we take our pleasures as we do our business in the extreme. Whenever we attempt to be happy, or jolly, or idle, we are too apt from the nature of our minds to get drunk. This is confounding abasement for pleasure, silliness for fun, and folly for happiness. Let us try to remedy this and remember that sober pleasures have no after repentances, and while in the home circle the egg flip may do no harm, yet the promiscuous drinking of men "down town" may cause Christmas to be remembered with a curse instead of a blessing.

The editor of the Fort Dodge *Messenger* rarely missed commenting on the Christmas season. In 1887 he reprinted an editorial from *Harper's Weekly* to support his own theories of the merry yuletide.

Among all our holidays Christmas is the happiest. Other days, like the Fourth of July and Decoration Day, have a patriotic association which is inspiring, and New Year's Day has an admonitory significance which is pathetic. But the tradition of Christmas is more universal and ideal than that of the other holidays, because it is the feast of fraternity, of human sympathy, and helpfulness. Not only is its sentiment glory to God, but its distinctive gospel is peace on earth and good will to man. It is the one day in the year on which selfishness is the most odious sin. Its peculiar observance is obvious, palpable, active thought of others. We all live under the general law of charity and of doing good. But this is the day on which we must make sure that our light shines so that men shall see our good works.

The year 1956 has its radio and television programs, its Santa Claus parades, its "Tree of Lights," its free movies for children. But Iowans still thrill to the singing of Handel's *Messiah*, the reading of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, and Moore's *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. A century of time has not dimmed the story of the Christ child nor erased from our hearts the true significance of the greatest Gift known to man.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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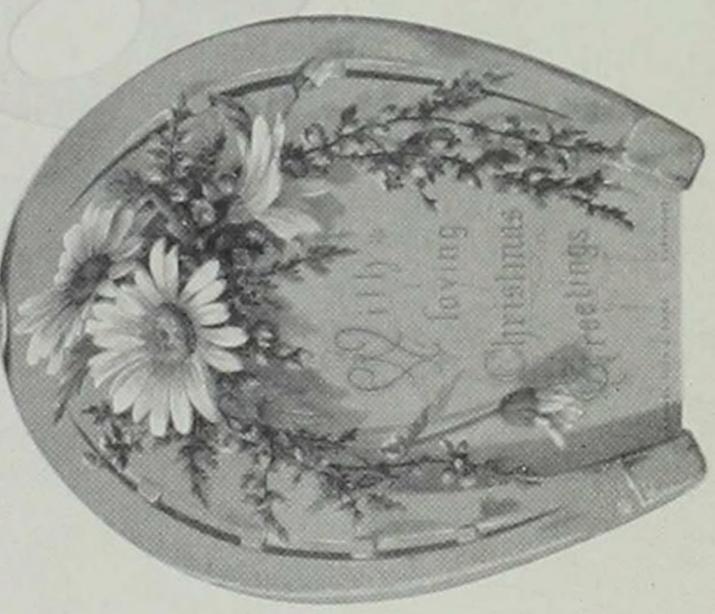
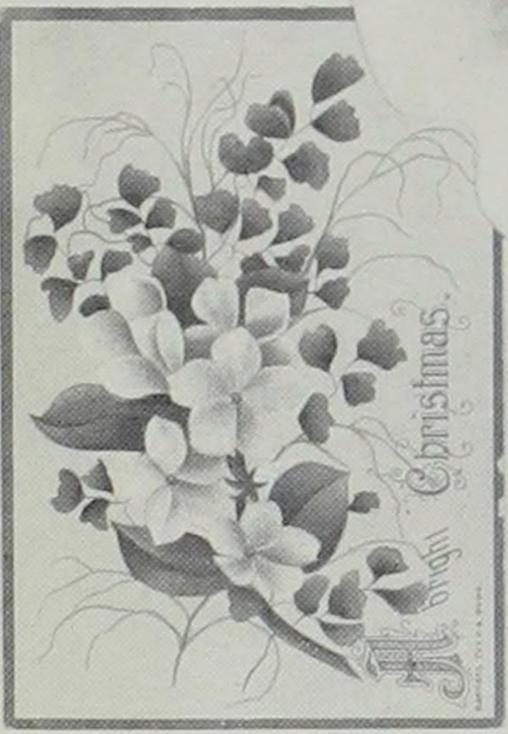
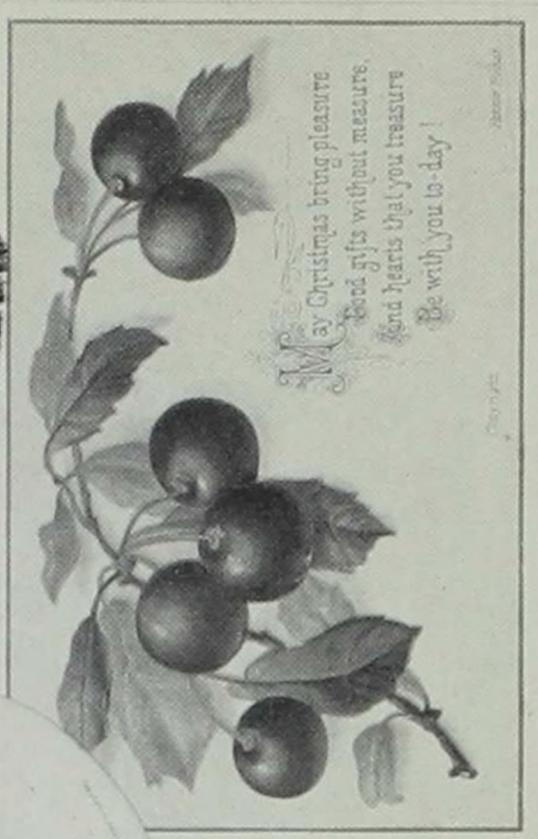
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Christmas Cards of Long Ago



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