

CHRISTMAS IN EARLY DAYS

IN the very early days, very little attention was given to Christmas as a public holiday. From 1846 to 1850, the town was small, the people poor, their chief purpose and labor being to secure a living and establish homes. If the day was observed at all, it was with dancing parties and frolics by the young folks, who were always ready for amusements, arranged by themselves, as concert troupes and dramatic barnstormers had not got this far West.

The first Christmas observance at The Fort was in 1845. The Indian title to the Reservation had expired, and some of the soldiers had been removed. W. F. Ayers, one of the first settlers in the county, and the first County Treasurer, had moved in from the country and taken one of the large log barrack buildings, where he gave an "open house." The community was small—merely a large family, outside of the soldiers. From the commissary supplies of the Post, Mrs. Ayers prepared a generous and sumptuous feast, for she was a good cook. There was no turkey, the Indians having killed or driven them away; neither was there deer or other wild game.

The event was participated in by a score or more, and story-telling and general conversation furnished entertainment. There were present two Sergeants and two privates from the garrison, the two privates, quite singularly, being old acquaintances of Ayers' "down East," who had drifted into the army. Their appearance added zest to the occasion. On clearing the table after the departure of the guests, a silver dollar was found under each plate.

There was no homecoming, no homegoing [sic], in those days. Distance, want of transportation, and general poverty made impossible the reunion of separated families.

Later on, the community was augmented so that social gatherings and dances were numerous. Said one of the old boys: "We

used to dance every night in the week, and Sundays, too." They didn't have orchestra music, but there were several good fiddlers, of whom the very earliest was George Michael, who kept a grocery; Glascott, Mason and Sam Vanatta, who made spinning wheels in the daytime and fiddled at night. He was a good fiddler, and made good spinning wheels, too, as numerous grandmothers of to-day can testify.

There was no oil, no kerosene. "Poled" tallow dips were used for lights, a "poled" dip being made with cotton wicking measured the length of a candle, then strung on a pole about an inch apart, and dipped in melted tallow, then hung up until cooled and hardened, the process being repeated until enough tallow had been taken on.

The small boy, and some of larger growth, usually celebrated the day skating on Horseshoe Lake, down near the old Fair Ground—but long since drained and buried under city improvements—and on a little pond where the Clapp Block now is.

Soon after the Indians were removed, wild game became plentiful again, and turkey and deer steaks graced the festive board. It is related that Camillus Leftwich, living near Four Mile Creek, started from his cabin one day to visit a neighbor, when a bear ran out from the underbrush ahead of him. He at once gathered together a few of his neighbors to capture the animal. An old flintlock shotgun was the only gun in the party, the other weapons being clubs and pitchforks. Leftwich had two dogs, which quickly took the scent, bruin was rounded up, and while the dogs were teasing him, a well-directed shot at short range laid him out.

In 1848, Martin X. Tucker, a large and somewhat pompous individual, with considerable self-importance, but whose early education had been so neglected he could not write his name, decided to improve his business. He had, in 1846, started the first tavern in the town, but the rapid influx of demand overtaxed its capacity, and he purchased a large, double log building on Market Street, between Second and Third, which had been used by the dragoons, and having, as he used to say, "run an avenue through it, put up a condition to it, and put an arbor on one side, to please Tillie (his daughter), he was able to detain the public in a more hostile manner."

At Christmas, he decided to celebrate the day with a housewarming. The young folks swarmed in on him and had a glorious time, with frolics and dances to the inspiring strains of "Money Musk" and "Arkansaw Traveler," sawed out by Vanatta and Glasscot. At midnight, Martin, dressed in a black, clerical suit, of the best production of Thrift, the tailor, and standing collar reaching to his ears, broke into the doings with: "Gentlemen and ladies, this thing must stop right now. All you who want to anticipate further will have to pay for it."

The pronunciamiento [sic] didn't feaze [sic] the girls and boys a bit; they "anticipated further" until the roosters began to crow, when Guy Ayers, with a lively team, a long, wide box on a pair of runners, distributed them to their several domiciles.

That was the Winter of the "big snow," unprecedented in the history of the county, and will never be forgotten by the settlers of that time. The snow began to fall early in November, and continued at intervals until December Twenty-first, when over twenty-two and one-half inches fell, and during the entire month the depth was over three feet. There were frequent violent winds, with low temperature, rendering it almost impossible for the people in the country to get about. If necessity forced the venturer to go any distance, the winds closed up his tracks as fast as made, so that he could not retrace them. Seth Williams, who lived a few miles from Polk City, when out in a windstorm, lost his bearings, stopped his team, and walked in a circle around it to keep from freezing until daylight came. There was much suffering in the cabins, which were illy [sic] constructed to withstand the piercing wind and extreme cold. There was also serious loss of poorly protected live stock, not only from weather exposure, but from timber wolves, which were forced by hunger to make raids on farm enclosures. It was a climatic period as memorable as the year of the "big flood."

During the war period, Christmas Day was made the occasion for festivals and bazaars, held in vacant storerooms and all available places on the East and West sides, to raise funds for the relief of soldiers' families. If the day fell on Sunday, the churches aided in the charitable work.

In 1864, the day fell on Sunday. I do not recall the weather condition. The Weather Bureau had not come into being. Leastwise,

the only public recognition of the day was by the Daily Register, in which "Dobbs" (Dixon), who engineered the local page, expostulated thus:

"The Roman and Grecian empires were doubtless large institutions. They had their national holidays and festivities, but they were greatly behind the times, as they neither had Christmas nor the Fourth of July. It never entered the heads of these pagan subjects that in the year of the world four thousand and four hundred, their system of polytheisms, which had been strengthened by the traditions of centuries, would receive a mortal shock at Bethlehem by the birth of the Son of Mary. They were all old fogies, to whom Christianity was a word and a power unknown, and their children, who had been taught to locate all their male and female deities on Mount Olympus, or some other earthly eminence, knew as little about Santa Claus and his mysterious visits to the domiciles of this world, as a Copperhead ("Dobbs" was a red-hot Union man) knows about Christ's Sermon on the Mount. We celebrate to-day, not the birth of Adam, nor the escape of Noah from a devastating flood, nor the release of the Hebrews from Egyptian captivity, nor the birth of the mad man of Macedonia, nor the building of the temple of Jerusalem, nor the founding of earthly empires. We celebrate the greatest event in the world's history—the birth of the world's Redeemer."

In the country, the day was observed by neighborhood visits. They didn't wait for invitations. Their latchstrings were always out—except to prevent intrusion by prowling Indians, seeking food or whiskey, and frightening the children half out of their wits. Then it was only necessary to pull in the string, which passed through a hole in the door, and the door was barred. At those visits, there would be discussed political, social, philosophical, and religious affairs, and thus, beside the delights of the viands that roasted on the hearth, or steamed in the pot, there was always good cheer and fellowship.

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