



Back Story

Footprints from the Past

December 2016



Welcome to the month of December, the month when we all run so fast it seems our heads are spinning. We're going to keep this short and sweet – and get it out right at the beginning of the month – so it's there before you're running at full speed.

In 2017 we have a whole new list of themes. Also, starting next month, each issue will have a short story that relates in some way to the monthly theme.

Here are the new themes for 2017:

January: Butter Molds, February: Amana Rag Balls, March: Milk Glass, April: The 1930's, May: Uncle Sam posters, June: Patsy Dolls, July: 4th of July postcards, August: Fiestaware, September: County Fairs, October: Rug Beaters, November: Pie Birds, December: Vintage Christmas ornaments

And on that we'll take a look at Christmases from the Past. We then return you to your regularly scheduled December madness.

Merry Christmas everyone! See you in 2017.

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Publication News

Good Old Days magazine accepted a Strange Easter in 1942. It's based on Iona Mae (Jones) Burk's story about Easter morning in 1942. Traveling to Missouri, the family was camped by the side of the road. Little Mae was worried that the Easter Bunny wouldn't find them. But it did, courtesy of mother Bea Jones. A paper-mache rabbit, filled with candy was left by the sleeping girl – clear out in the middle of nowhere. This Easter tale will be in the April 2017 issue.

Purpose magazine accepted a story, Mildred's Sweet Spirit. The theme was 'Fruits of the Spirit' and a story about my Grandma Cline was what came to mind when I thought of fruits of the spirit. It will be in the July 2017 issue.

Women's World accepted a snippet about a friend's kindness to me. It will be in the Circle of Kindness column in their December 19th issue.

1940's Yuletide Facts



During World War II Christmas trees were in short supply because of a lack of manpower (to cut the trees down) and a shortage of railroad space to ship the trees to market. Americans rushed to buy American-made Visca artificial trees.

In 1941, a five-foot Christmas tree could be purchased for 75 cents.

The shortage of materials—like aluminum and tin—used to produce ornaments led many people to make their own ornaments at home. Magazines contained patterns for ornaments made out of non-priority war materials, like paper, string, and natural objects, such as pine cones or nuts.

Electric bubble lights were created during the 1940s and remain popular even today.

To give their Christmas tree a snow-covered effect, people mixed a box of Lux soap powder with two cups of water and brushed the concoction on the branches of their tree.

Fewer men at home resulted in fewer men available to dress up and play Santa Claus. Women served as substitute Santa's at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City and at other department stores throughout the United States.

"I'll Be Home For Christmas" and "White Christmas" were both written during the 1940s and quickly gained popularity with the war-weary, but optimistic, population.

Travel during the holidays was limited for most families due to the rationing of tires and gasoline. Americans saved up their food ration stamps to provide extra food for a fine holiday meal.

Many Americans threw their German blown-glass ornaments and exotic Japanese ornaments in the trash as soon as the war began. Shortly after the war, Corning Glass Company in New York began mass-producing Christmas tree balls using machines designed to produce light bulbs. Corning could make more ornaments in a single minute than a German cottage glass blower could make in a whole day.

Yuletide facts compliments of The National WWII Museum

Celebrating Christmas in Days Past



1930's Christmas family photo

Here's a bit about Christmases from the past. *History Today* writes this about how our iconic Christmas tree came into our American celebration.

As early as 1832, Harriet Martineau had identified what would become one of the most familiar symbols of the American Christmas. She had 'little doubt' that the Christmas tree would 'become one of the most flourishing exotics of New England'. By the 1850s, many Americans, not just New Englanders, had fallen in love with the German custom. Some had seen Christmas trees for the first time when they had toured Germany and then recreated their experience of German Christmas celebrations for friends at home. Others viewed them first-hand in the homes of German Americans. The media introduced the custom even more widely, inspiring Americans throughout the nation to adopt the tradition as their own.

As the tree gained prominence in front parlours, it also assumed a place in the market. During the 1850s, town squares began to bristle with trees cut for seasonable profits. Seamlessly, the 'German-ness' of the tree receded as it became an icon of an American festival and, to some, an index of acculturation. Even in the homes of 'the Hebrew brethren', 'Christmas trees bloomed', noted a Philadelphia newspaper in 1877. '[T]he little ones of Israel were as happy over them as Christian children'. By 1900, one American in five was estimated to have a Christmas tree.

At first, the decoration of these fragrant evergreens reflected the whim of folk tradition. Celebrants added nuts, strings of popcorn or beads, oranges, lemons, candies and home-made trinkets. However, widely-read newspapers and ladies' magazines raised the standards for ornamentation. (One suggestion: cotton batting dipped in thin gum arabic then diamond dust made a 'beautiful frosting' for tree branches.) Homely affectations gave way to more uniform and sophisticated ones, the old style overtaken by the urge to make the tree a showpiece for the artistic arrangement of 'glittering baubles, the stars, angels, etc'.

Tree decoration soon became big business. As early as 1870, American businessmen began to import large quantities of ornaments from Germany to be sold on street corners and, later, in toy shops and variety stores. Vendors hawked glass ornaments and balls in bright colours, tin cut in all imaginable shapes and wax angels with spun glass wings. 'So many charming little ornaments can now be bought ready to decorate Christmas trees that it seems almost a waste of time to make them at home', one advertisement declared.

History Today also talks about how our popular Christmas cards came into play. Towards the end, when it mentions a postal official's complaint about the mania for Christmas cards, I chuckle as I wonder what that official would think of the massive amounts of mail that passes through our postal offices during Christmas time now.

The rise of Christmas cards revealed other aspects of the new holiday's profile. R.H. Pease, a printer and variety store owner who lived in Albany, New York, distributed the first American-made Christmas card in the early 1850s. A family scene dominated the small card's centre, but unlike its English forerunner (itself only a decade older), the images on each of its four corners made no allusion to poverty, cold, or hunger. Instead, pictures of Santa, reindeer, dancers and an array of Christmas presents and Christmas foods suggested the bounty and joys of the season.

It took Louis Prang, a recent German immigrant and astute reader of public taste, to expand the sending of cards to a grand scale. Prang arrived in America in 1850 and soon made a name as a printer. By 1870, he owned perhaps two-thirds of the steam presses in America and had perfected the colour printing process of chromolithography. After distributing his trade cards by the thousands at an international exposition in 1873, the wife of his London agent suggested he add a Christmas greeting to them. When Prang introduced these new cards into the United States in 1875, they proved such a hit that he could not meet demand.

Behind Prang's delight in profits lay a certain idealism. He saw his cards as small, affordable works of art. Through them he hoped to stimulate popular interest in original decorative art and to educate public taste. In 1880, Prang began to sponsor annual competitions for Christmas card designs to promote these ends. These contests made Christmas cards so popular that other card manufacturers entered the market. By 1890, cheap imitations from his native Germany drove Prang from the Christmas card market entirely.

Whatever Prang's plans for democratising art in his accepted land, the advent of Christmas cards in the marketplace soon served functions in keeping with the increasing pace and essential nature of American society. In a hurried and mobile nation, more and more Americans resorted to cards instead of honouring the older custom of writing Christmas letters or making personal holiday visits. The cards' ready-made sentiments drew together friends and families spread across a rapidly expanding national geography, making them a staple of December's

mail. 'I thought last year would be the end of the Christmas card mania, but I don't think so now', one postal official complained in 1882. 'Why four years ago a Christmas card was a rare thing. The public then got the mania and the business seems to be getting larger every year'.

Jumping ahead in time, here's a peek at a Christmastime storefront display, in 1923. (A segment follows that talks about Christmas during the Victoria years.)



A classic '20s storefront! This is the Sport Mart at 1303 F St. N.W., Dec. 1923 in Washington D.C

And then, the Great Depression hit our nation. Toys, for most, were a little known novelty. For most families in America, a plate of food, with maybe an orange or a candy in a stocking, was all the Christmas treat they'd see. Here's a photo of a family's Christmas dinner in 1935.



Farm Security Administration: Christmas dinner in the home of Earl Pauley near Smithland, Iowa. (Circa 1935)



Gradually American got through the difficult post-Depression years. Life was finally improving and families had it a little better than before. Then, World War II disrupted life, this time around the world. 1940s.org had this to say about Christmas during the war time years.

In the 1940's, while America was in the midst of World War II, the way Christmas was celebrated was a lot different than today. Decorating for Christmas involved the idea of simplicity, mostly out of necessity.

While the men were off fighting World War II, moms at home would try to make things as normal as they could for their children, and would often encourage their children to write Christmas cards, and to make their fathers feel as though he was still part of the festivities. Mom and kids would make large care packages to send to their dad. Inside these care packages would be cards, candies, cookies, pictures, and other treats to really try to bring the Christmas spirit to their men.

Some people believe that the holiday shopping season that now begins well before Christmas actually began during World War II because it took so long for a package to reach our troops. Merchants began encouraging people to shop early for the season to make sure the packages would arrive in time.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year, and whether it is now or then, the holidays are a time for families to gather and show their love for one another by spending time together to decorate a tree, share a meal, and give each other heartfelt gifts.

Victorian Christmas Traditions



By Victorian times, America, a land of immigrants, had adopted a variety of Christmas traditions from other lands and other customs. Many of the traditions that we associate with Christmas time now, were motifs and traditions incorporated into our mainstream culture through the years. On the *Writers In the Storm* blog, several years ago they shared the following information about Victorian Christmas traditions.

Christmas rituals first got a toehold in New York with savvy merchants who were quick to realize their commercial value. German bakeries began staying open late to decorate their windows with red silk bunting and holly. Holiday shoppers could not resist the cakes, toys and candies displayed under glittering gas-jet lamps. Nor could they ignore the smells of cinnamon kuchen (cakes)

and sweet almonds paste. Also, by the 1870s Macy's department store dressed their windows with great Christmas displays. One window displayed an amphitheater of wax, rag, bisque and hand-painted porcelain dolls imported from Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland, and Bohemia. In another window, scenes from Uncle Tom's Cabin were composed in a panorama with steam-driven movable parts.

By the 1880s Christmas's conquest of the US was complete. Even Boston capitulated. Victorians now sent chromolithograph Christmas cards or painted their own. They filled silver paper cornucopias with candies. They decorated Christmas trees with apples, tangerines, walnuts dipped in egg white; strings of popcorn and cranberries; gold-foil "Dresdens" shaped as miniature stars and steamships, elves and fish and birds. Candles lit trees and many a muslin dress caught fire! Glass ornaments and icicles were introduced by the Germans around the mid-1880s. Taking the tree down was a fun activity for the children in the Victorian era as they were allowed to eat the eatable goodies on it.

Christmas preparations went beyond the stitching of new dresses, the gathering of holly and mistletoe and the stirring of the pudding. Handmade gifts, labored on months in advance, were often hung on the tree. There might be a pen-wiper in the shape of a waterlily, a knitting bag worked with silk floss and matching fringe, a red rose potpourri, quince jam, and maybe a pair of embroidered bed slippers. Christmas cards were addressed with nibbed pens and the aromas of scented paper in the stationer's shop, inks and sealing wax filled the air. Brown or white paper wrappings were used and sealed shut with sealing wax.

Christmas Eve brought carolers singing Noel, While Shepherds Watched, Good King Wenceslas, Come All Ye Faithful and Silent Night. After singing the carolers came into the hall for hot beer, punch, and pennies. In many homes, Christmas Eve was the time when personal gifts were exchanged, while in others they waited until after church Christmas day. Children hung their stockings by the fireplace or over a bed post.

Originally, the gifts under the tree were handmade and might include a sled or a carved toy made by father, a rag doll made by mother. A child might crochet the edges of a handkerchief. Commercially made gifts became popular by the 1880's. A child usually received only one store-bought toy. It could have been a wind-up dancing bear, Logos, an early form of Scrabble, a precursor of Monopoly called Moneta, penny whistles, pull toys or stuffed animals. But the best gift of all was a father's gift to his entire family. It might be a magic lantern with a four-wick oil lamp and a packet of twenty-five hand-tinted slides. The slides told a spooky story, with images of wicked gargoyles and saintly fairies cast upon a nine-foot-square white muslin screen.

After the gifts were discovered there was breakfast which was followed by church. The church was decorated with holly but almost never with mistletoe, as it was the badge of the Druid. By the 1880s, poinsettia plants were added

to the array. After church, everyone headed back home to a mid-day Christmas dinner.

But first there was the grown-up gift exchange, and a glass of wine and seed-cake, providing this hadn't taken place the night before. Then it was time to sit at the table with its brightly colored paper crackers, and good eats. The cracker, enjoyed in England as well, was brightly colored paper wrapped around a small gift and then twisted at each end. When the ends were tugged to open them, they made a cracking noise. Recently these have started to reappear in elite Christmas catalogs and specialty shops.

The main course depended upon ethnic background and where one lived. Anglophiles (popular term at the time describing one who greatly admired English ways) favored sirloin or beef or goose. But most Americans served turkey stuffed with oysters. There might be a goose and/or ham too, sometimes all. Occasionally there were two turkeys, one boiled, and one roasted. There was also likely to be sausages, bacon, roast potatoes and whatever vegetables were available – turnips, baked squash, or some cabbage dish. Then there was homemade bread, preserves, mince pie or plum pudding.

Later in the afternoon, after a massive kitchen clean-up and the children's naps, came the long-rehearsed Christmas program. Children in velvet breeches or dresses and high-buttoned shoes recited their memorized recitations. Family members played solos on the violin or piano, or composed plays, depicting scenes from the Bible or events in history. To close this glorious day, the family gathered around the piano to sing Silent Night. Sometimes games would be played such as Blind Man's Bluff and Hunt The Slipper. In some homes, this is when the mistletoe kissing was done too.

