

The Spirit of Christmas Revisited



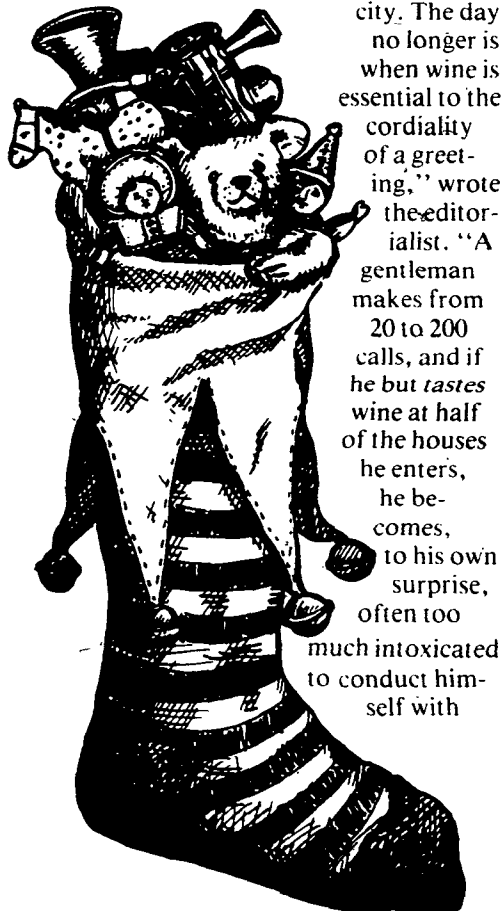
By George Murphy
Come, follow me through Rochester's holiday seasons past — and be careful you don't trip over my shadow, for it is a long one.

It is expedient that you travel lightly, since we have 100 years to navigate, beginning with 1839. At times, you may feel as disoriented as Napoleon in exile, but I think I can promise you an interesting journey.

The decision to begin with 1839 was arbitrary, but not wholly without pertinence, for it was the year in which the Christmas hymn, "Joy to the World," was published. Its opening strain is derived from the chorus, "Glory to God," in Handel's oratorio, "Messiah."

In the same year, three days before New Year's Eve, a gentleman who identified himself only as "A Bachelor," scattered his apprehensions over the editorial page of the Rochester Journal.

"The agreeable custom of calling upon all acquaintances on the first day of January has become very general in our



city. The day no longer is when wine is essential to the cordiality of a greeting," wrote the editor. "A gentleman makes from 20 to 200 calls, and if he but tastes wine at half of the houses he enters, he becomes, to his own surprise, often too much intoxicated to conduct himself with

propriety, or to carry himself erect."

He concluded by advising the ladies who served as hosts at such gatherings that gentlemen "prefer not to be tempted" and that the ladies should therefore be stingy with their wine.

Among Christmas gift suggestions of that year were ladies' card cases of pearl, ivory, and morocco — plain or steel-mounted — with silver locks. They were available at C. Morse's store, 17 Exchange Street.

Christmas, 1840, when the national population stood at 17 million, saw the first display of a Christmas tree in a Rochester house of worship. The German Lutheran Church on Stillson Street placed a 12-foot evergreen tree, adorned with toys and sweetmeats, in front of the pulpit.

"I sent you no Christmas greeting and no good wishes for the year," Bishop McQuaid wrote. "I now send, from a bed of sickness where I have been for 11 days, an abundance of good wishes and blessings . . ."

In the holiday season of 1849, which saw a gas light installed in the White House, shoppers in Rochester were buying a great many books. The books were not only "uplifting," but cheap. Jewelry, "in brilliant profusion," was available at Burr's and at Cook and Stillwell's; hats and caps, "in splendid abundance," could be purchased at Clark and Gilman; toys were for sale at Hiram Allen's and Henry Scramton's; and confectionary, "in all its sweet variety and beauty," was displayed at Winslow's, O'Brien's and Hastings and Company.

The hymn, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," with words by the Reverend Edmund Hamilton Sears, a graduate of Union College, Schenectady, was published in the Christmas season of 1850 — a season marked by a holiday supper at Corinthian Hall, sponsored by the ladies of Rochester's First Presbyterian Church. Diners were also invited to consider a variety of "useful and fancy articles" for sale.

The Swiss Bell Ringers visited Corinthian Hall from December 23 to 25, 1850. In the same year, William Mudgett, grocer, urged Rochesterians to prepare for the holidays by buying citron, raisins by the box, and currants.

The American Civil War continued on

its grisly course with the advent of Christmas, 1862. Perhaps some Rochesterians assuaged their grief over the death or wounding of a loved one by visiting Mr. Hancock's store, 220 State St., which offered "the best old bourbon and Old Tom Gin."

John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, "Snow-Bound," was published in the joyous season, 1866, a time remembered by Belle (Davis) Osgoodby of Rochester. "There were no trees. We hung our stockings on Christmas Eve and got up early in the morning to see what was in them," Osgoodby said. "If we found an orange, it was a great treat, for we seldom had them during the warm months."

There were, in fact, few Christmas trees in homes of the 1870s, and gifts were

simple and uncompromisingly useful — knitted mittens, hoods, scarves and socks, and crocheted dresses and shirts.

Frosted cards made their debut in that decade, only to be replaced in popularity by fringed cards. Forty years ago, when she was 91, Mrs. Hosea Rogers of Rochester recalled the Christmas of 1877.

"I had been married about a year, and received a card from my father in Canada," she said. "It was the first one I had ever seen. He had paid twenty-five cents for it. My mother thought that was an outrageous extravagance."

Some of the "poetry" printed in local newspapers in the holiday season, 1880, interposed the season of cordiality with maudlin sentiments, often expressed in the simple repetition of a jingle. An example from the Rochester Journal reads,

"A tender infant girl
Lay in her shroud and coffin.
Her cheeks were like the pearl,
For tears had washed them often.
Ah, me! Her lot was sad and wild,
She was a drunken mother's child."

Two weeks before Christmas, 1900, the spirit of magnanimity found no room in the granitic heart of a Rochester Times editorial writer who castigated Police Justice Charles B. Ernst as "Unfit for and a disgrace to the office he holds." A Times reporter who had dogged Ernst's footsteps for a day submitted a detailed report in which he said that Ernst had spent considerable time at home, at hotels, at the Central Cigar Store, and at Lafayette Heide's Saloon.

In the holiday season, 1904, Bernard McQuaid, bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, wrote to a friend. "I sent you no Christmas greeting and no good wishes for the year," Bishop McQuaid wrote. "I now send, from a bed of sickness where I have been for 11 days, an abundance of good wishes and blessings . . . Pity the sorrows of a poor old man, bound hand and feet and gagged by a doctor and a trained nurse who knows more about myself than he knows."

"But I do not propose to die right away. I send you a copy of a subscription list for a new seminary building (St. Andrews). It was thought about for one week, sent into the hands of an architect the second, and placed in the hands of the priests for their offerings in the third week . . . This is the way in which we do things in Rochester."

Rochesterians of all faiths prayed for the recovery of the venerable bishop and he did not die "right away," but five years later — January 19. He was 86 years old.

For Christmas, 1928, time, money and effort were spent with a burst of impetuosity by Nellie L. German, owner of the Phelps Apartments, 358 Lake Ave. She had a facsimile of the cave in Bethlehem

erected in front of the building. It was 30 feet wide, 18 feet high and 8 feet deep, and included all appropriate figurines. She had a huge star placed on the roof of the building.

On Christmas Day, 1932, America was in the depths of a depression, but in Rochester, the temperature reached a balmy 64 degrees.

The holiday season, 1935, was a good time to be alive, according to Katharine Hepburn. She escaped death by inches in Newark, N.J., when she ran under the whirling props of a plane to elude photographers.

A shopping expedition in Rochester in December, 1935, was evidence of the value of the dollar — a conviction that parents have forever tried to transfer to their offspring.

Wegmans, which had six markets, offered leg of lamb for 21 cents a pound. A quart basket of brussel sprouts was only 12½ cents. Florida oranges were 21 cents a dozen, pork loins were 17 cents per pound, eggs were 39 cents a dozen, and boneless veal roast was 25 cents a pound.

The National Clothing Store on East Main Street was selling knickers (wool, cashmere and corduroy) for \$1.95 a pair. J.E. Thompson, 78 S. Clinton Ave., offered Mendoza beaver, northern seal and French beaver coats for \$78, and silk slips (moisture-proof, rip-proof, and shrink-proof) for \$1.95. Sibley's advertised Nunn-Bush shoes at \$6.75 a pair and 32-piece china dinner sets (two-tone ivory and white) for \$4.98.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, 1935, a famous "eating house" fell to the wrecker's ball. The "Little Casino," at Corinthian and Mill streets, had catered to diners for more than a half century on land deeded by Colonel Nathaniel Rochester, founder of the city.

The Regent, Strand, Century, Temple, RKO Palace, Little, Madison, Monroe, West End, and Loew's Rochester movie theaters advertised such holiday fare as "Mutiny on the Bounty," with Charles Lughton and Clark Gable, "Three Kids and a Queen," with Henry Armetta, and "Lottery Lovers," with Lew Ayers.

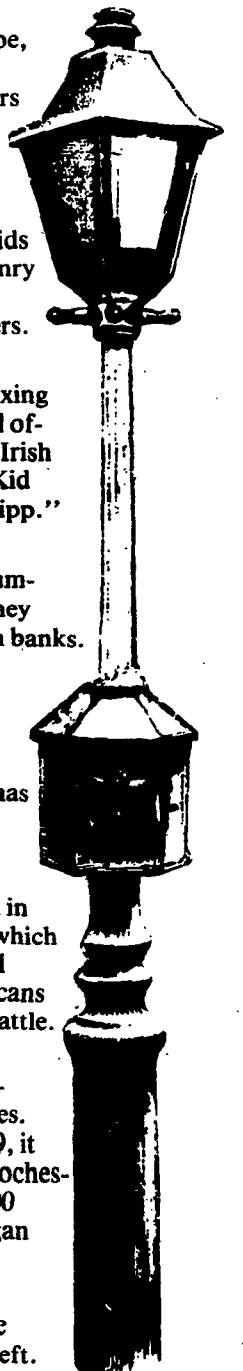
Two weeks before Christmas, 1935, the boxing card at Convention Hall offered "Sammy Leta vs. Irish Jimmy Brown," and "Kid Snookie vs. Georgia Chipp."

Rochester's Christmas Club depositors numbered 14,566 in 1935. They withdrew \$485,000 from banks.

In 1939, Walker Lee, Rochester's superintendent of buildings, asked managers of movie theaters not to place Christmas trees in lobbies. He said they were a fire hazard. But a far greater hazard lay just over the horizon in 1939. It was the year in which World War II began and in which 292,131 Americans were destined to die in battle.

For a couple of years, however, the carnage remained in far away places. On Christmas Day, 1939, it was hardly noticed by Rochesterians, notably the 8,000 who jammed the toboggan slide at Ellison Park.

For some young men in that crowd, there were only a few Christmases left.



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