

## Back to the future:

# A time capsule journey in the spirit of Christmases past

By Emily Morrison

**I**t's Christmas Eve, 1985 — at least when we enter the theater — as I brave the bitterly cold lake-effect winds to take my six-year-old son, Gabriel, to GeVa's *A Christmas Carol*.

On our way out of the elegantly refurbished former Naval Armory and Convention Hall, brimming with seasonal cheer and heartened by the classic 19th-century tale we've just seen reenacted, we chatter about plum puddings and ghostly visitations. As Gabe struggles to zip his jacket, I peruse the framed collection of historic GeVa lore that decorates the lobby wall. In 1919, I discover, the Vatican Choir made its first appearance outside Rome, within these very walls.

We tip our hats to history and stride out into the blustering snow. I gasp, and Gabriel shrieks with glee: before us, in Woodbury Boulevard, horse-drawn sleighs pass on eerily gaslit brick streets. Xerox Square has vanished, and Midtown Plaza is nowhere to be seen. The only familiar landmark is the steeple of St. Mary's Church, across Washington Square.

We've somehow emerged into the Gay Nineties, in a blue surround of snow. We blink, rub our eyes, and stare into my pocket mirror for some sign of the vanished present, but our faces, wrapped in Victorian mufflers and topped by bizarre "period" hats we might have borrowed from GeVa's costume shop, peer back in astonishment.

The car, of course, is nowhere to be seen, so we hail a sleigh full of carolers and ask for a lift to the office of the Catholic Journal at 327 East Main Street, to see if we might put through a call on what we assume will be some very primitive form of business telephone. The carolers have no room, but direct us to the trolley. Gabe blinks in amazement as we ride along, and almost trips over his hobnailed boots as we alight before a sidewalk chestnut vendor just like the one who plied his trade in the London streets of GeVa's stage.

I fish in the pocket of my cloak for my thoroughly modern Courier-Journal key. No such luck: my car and house keys are gone, and the imposing wooden door stands locked before us.

Miraculously, the heavy door swings open in a cloud of bluish smoke — thankfully, minus the clank of chains and the ghostly face of Jacob Marley. No Cratchit-like figure scurries forward out of the shadows to greet us; the premises is deserted, and the press stands silent in the dim gaslight from the street below.

The newspaper is in its infancy, and the offices have no telephone yet — at least, not one that I can locate. I resolve to rest awhile before going out into the snow again to search for H. G. Wells' marvelous Victorian time machine or perhaps a black hole that might lead us out of this inexplicable fourth dimension we've somehow stumbled into.

Gabriel fiddles and fidgets in the type drawer and makes alphabet soup of the heavy leaden type, arranging the letters on the floor in the puddles of melting ice left by his boots. "Look, Mom!" he exclaims. "I spelled 'Optimus Prime!'" I try to discern this apparently nonsensical legend, illuminated by a kerosene lamp I manage to light with a phosphorus match I've found on the editor's desk. All I can make out are barely unscrambled collections of letters that seem to spell out the words "tin soldier."

I try to imagine our editor, bereft of her indispensable typesetting video display terminal and Associated Press Stylebook, or our photographer laboriously toning platinum prints in the darkroom. Without half-tones, of course, he'd be limited to looking wistfully over the engraver's shoulder (or flipping through magazine photos reproduced for publication by photogravure) while he waited impatiently for the 20th century to roll around.

'Tis the night before Christmas, nevertheless, and Gabriel begins to doze fitfully against my shoulder, while visions of lemon punch and sugarplums dance in his tousled head. I page through back issues of the Catholic Journal from recent years, searching frantically at first for some definitive sign that this is all a feverish dream and not some vision inspired by our heightened imaginations.

The Christmas edition of 1892 offers not so much as a clue, but the fanciful woodcuts and almost comical advertisements in this early "Holiday Number" provide some measure of diversion from my baffling plight. "The annual elections of officers of the Children of Mary of St. Mary's Church took place at the convent last Sunday afternoon," announces a small news item on the front page. At least I know for certain that our journey so far is only a temporal one.

In an informative article on page 13, entitled "Bags for Christmas — A Word in Season About Holiday Gifts," I am advised to "take time by the forelock and avoid the rush" of holiday shopping. The story that follows offers "practical instructions for the manufacture of pretty and useful presents — handkerchief bags and work bags.

"There is nothing more tiresome than to be obliged at the last minute to rush around and buy one's gifts, spending more than one can well afford, when by the



## Christmas toys

In no respect is the extravagance of modern taste and the progress of mechanical genius better exemplified than in the children's toys of the present. The skill of inventors and manufacturers has been exerted to the utmost to bring out novelties in Christmas playthings, and the result this year is more attractive than ever before. Most of these toys are of considerable practical value, and some of them sell for from \$5 to \$100. At the same time toys that far surpass the playthings of other days may be purchased for comparatively insignificant prices. The industry of toymaking began at Nuremberg in the fifteenth century. At present Paris is the headquarters for the manufacture of toys, although Germany divides the honors with the French metropolis in many respects. In this country many large factories are devoted to this industry in New York, Philadelphia and Boston.

Reprinted from the Catholic Journal  
Christmas edition, 1893

exercise of a little forethought, money and strength can be saved."

I wonder, as I flip back to an earlier Christmas issue, if a little forethought might somehow have derailed our current runaway ride through the decades, or at least sidetracked us by a matter of days instead of nearly a century. I probably could have used a few extra days myself to avoid the Christmas rush. Stitching up handkerchief bags would undoubtedly be a more pleasant diversion than fending off the hordes of last-minute shoppers at Marketplace Mall — or even Sibley's, Main Street, as fond as I usually am of shopping downtown.

A Sibley's ad in the edition of December 17, 1892, takes my mind temporarily off my troubles: "Doors stand open;

not even time to swing as the throng come and go; lookers are few, buyers are many; everything for Christmas now." The passage of 93 years notwithstanding, very little seems to have changed.

In the following "Holiday Number," a marvelous little story entitled "Belief in Santa Claus" jumps out at me from its hiding place among such advertisements as one from Calross' Bakery offering "a Christmas menu that would tempt even a dyspeptic."

"The belief in Santa Claus gave me years of unqualified satisfaction," the article quotes one Mrs. Burton Harrison, speaking, I must assume, in 1893. "Whether it was actually swallows in the chimney top or flying squirrels gamboling

continued on Page 9

