

Remembering some Christmas pasts

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Christmas is fast approaching with its wonderful traditions and not so wonderful "still-have-to-do" moments. Records of earlier celebrations allow us a glimpse of some of the same traditions but also of a slower, seemingly more peaceful season.

The earliest mention of a Christmas celebration in our area once again comes from Luzena Stanley Wilson. Around 1850 she and her family celebrated the holiday with an official dinner party.

"The second Christmas of our stay (in the Vaca Valley) I gave a dinner party, and invited all the Americans in the valley; even then I entertained only five guests.

"My dinner party was considered very fine for the time. My cook was a negro of the blackest hue, who had formerly cooked for some army officer, and was accustomed to skirmishing, as he expressed it. The menu included onion soup, roast elk, a fricassee of lamb, boiled onions, the home-grown luxury of radishes, lettuce and parsley, dried-apple pies, and rice pudding. Fowls were too rare and valuable to be sacrificed, as yet, to the table, and probably had they been killed would have defied mastication, for they were, like ourselves, pioneers."

(Did you enjoy the Vacaville Museum's onion soup during Merriment on Main? The Museum Guild serves the soup each year as a reminder of that first Christmas party.)

A generation later, Vacavillian Butler Donaldson worked as a pharmacist in Sacramento, writing long letters to his fiancée, Melissa Allison, who lived with her Harbison relatives at the time. In a letter of Jan. 12, 1871, he described the latest excitement to sweep the town during the season of 1870.

"I worked all day Christmas and New Year's but did not miss much as it was the dullest holidays Sacramento ever had. The whole city is crazy on the subject of skates. We have a large rink established but there are not skates enough. All of Sac are on wheels. I was there two or three times, but skating at 75 cents an evening is a more expensive amusement than I can afford. George and Matt (friends of Butler) both have the disease, but not as badly as most of the Sacramentans. One hears nothing but skates and skating rink from morning til night wherever you go."

Gift giving took place then as now and Vacaville residents found a nice selection at their

local stores.

In 1883, M. Blum's department store advertised a "Grand Display of Holiday Goods - Fine Art Books - Christmas Cards - Fine Stationery - Toilet Sets" as well as "All the Latest Novelties in Brocaded Satins, Brocaded Velvets, Silk Velvets, Chinelle Fringes."

And in the social column on Dec. 22, 1883, the Vacaville Reporter let harried shoppers know that "Isa Blum went to the city this week to buy more Christmas goods."

Advertisements for Christmas goods 10 years later were even more varied. Blum's let residents know in 1893 that "Our Holiday Display is Positively THE FINEST That has ever been Displayed in this County."

Celluloid cases, silk goods, perfumery, fine crockery, table cutlery, willow and plush rockers and plated ware were some of the gift suggestions made. Also new was an advertisement for children's toys: "Everything ... and no two alike."

By 1906, several new stores in town made selecting the perfect gift easier than ever. The Vacaville Mercantile Co. advertised on Dec. 22: "We naturally, at this particular time when all hearts are forgivingly inclined toward remembrance of true and tried friends, feel like quoting a few articles we have left which would gladden the hearts of husband, wife, son, daughter, grandfather, mother and sweetheart (together with the little ones, God bless them), at a price equal to city announcement. ...

"Choice handkerchiefs, ties, scarfs (sic), fancy suspenders, toys, ornaments, gloves, table linen, china, furniture, blankets, bedding, etc. together with choice sauerkraut and a complete assortment of select groceries, which are attainable at a price consistent with reason."

Other stores offered mufflers, suspenders, fine cigars in Christmas boxes, Austrian, German and Bavarian Chinaware and "Imported Japanese Art Goods - Holiday line of Silk Kimonos - Chinaware and Brassware - Useful Articles in Bamboo Work," imported by Nippon & Co.

A. H. Willock's offered a special treat "Candy for Christmas - Chocolates & French mixed - Christmas Boxes."

One wonders if these were the boxes Luther Harbison gave out as Christmas presents to his fellow patients at the sanitarium where he recuperated from tuberculosis in 1919.

In a letter to his wife, Hester Harbison, he wrote on Dec. 25: "I am sure those boxes were the great surprise of the evening and they were highly appreciated. The way some

of them began to devour the contents showed an appreciation above the desire for candy. I received many thanks and they still continue to come in. I honor myself by assuring one and all that the idea of remembering everybody originated with Mrs. Harbison."

Unfortunately, his fellow patients did not show the same good taste in gift giving. In the letter's P. S., Luther Harbison added: "Last night after getting into bed, a knock and the door opened and I was handed a little 6 in. long stocking made of red mosquito netting and it contained a piece of Wrigley's chewing gum, an all-day sucker and some of the hardest and vilest candy I ever tasted."

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