

Christmas trees become tradition in 1800s

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Sunday, December 31, 1995

Information for this article came from the Solano County archives.

Last in a series

By 1877, there were beginning to be a number of family Christmas trees, and it was also noted that it was becoming a custom to have a public Christmas tree. Apparently the public tree was not located in a church, but in another building or hall. It was felt by some that this "public tree" made an ostentatious display of the holiday, at the same time recognizing that it did give the children a great deal of joy.

Fairfield and Suisun each had public trees decorated with presents. In Fairfield, a small house was fashioned next to the tree with a chimney, through which Santa Claus made an entrance. He then distributed the gifts.

Suisun City's tree had 564 presents in 1877. Despite a bad economy, there were a number of valuable gifts, including three gold watches and a costly set of books.

Christmas Eve at Rockville also featured a tree loaded with gifts. After the children sang traditional songs and received their presents, the floor was cleared for dancing.

Indeed, 1877 was a year for parties. Fifty couples attended the ball and supper party given by Mrs. Roberts at the Roberts Hotel in Suisun, for which people came from Dixon, Vallejo, Denverton and Bird's Landing. Many of these "suppers" were cold buffets. This particular supper was said to be highly complimented as being most tastefully prepared.

Mrs. Pittman's party in Bridgeport, called the Bridgeport Tree & Dance, was also well-attended. A bountiful meal was provided and there were presents for the youngsters. After presents, the children were shuffled off to the schoolhouse while the adults stayed at the Pittman Hotel for an old-fashioned holiday dance. Marion Stilts provided the music.

Theme parties were quite popular with folks. A Poor Man's Party was held at Suisun's Union Hall. The most conspicuous poor men were C.P. Reeves and E.D. Perkins, who wore clothing that was completely tattered and torn.

However, that year it was the party in Elmira that was rated as the most frolicsome. It was held in the New Hall. The McCray Brothers String Band provided the music and a

“princely” repast was served.

A severe winter storm that year flooded out one local merchant from his home, forcing him to make a hasty departure in a rowboat and leaving behind all he owned. Because of his huge personal loss, he staged an after-Christmas sale, selling his entire stock of books, stationery and holiday goods at an auction at Suisun’s Pressley’s drugstore. It was announced as a rare chance to get an unfortunate man’s goods at prices next to nothing.

Dixon’s Holiday Ball was a masquerade ball held on Dec. 28. People from all over the county attended. It was reported that the music was excellent, a good supper was served and that the costumes were brilliant and fantastic.

To round out the celebrations, the firm of Kittle & Kuhn extended New Year’s Eve party invitations, with the celebration to be held in their new quarters on Main Street in Suisun. Messrs. K&K made elaborate preparations for this social that was to have music, song and dance.

Shipping statistics gave a view of the past year’s prosperity. The shipping firm of Johnson & Emgh’s listed exporting hay, wheat, barley, buckwheat, beans, alfalfa seed and potatoes. The Pine and Palmer Warehouse listed all the above and included straw bags. Exports by steamboat included game, poultry, butter, eggs, 22 horses and three cows. Railroad exports included small fish, dried fish, sturgeon, salmon, three calves, 60 sheep, 111 hogs, pike, potatoes vegetables, wood, beef, boards and brick.

Christmas 1890 began with a “Grand Holiday Sale.” Among the specialty items listed at this particular business establishment were dolls, toy wagons, purses, toy barrows, albums, velocipedes (early cycles), books, fans, autograph albums, cutlery and doll carriages. Also writing desks, brushes, combs, umbrellas, furniture, a line of plush goods and an assortment of nuts and confectionery.

Another leading store, M. Dinkelspiel & Co., advertised useful articles selected with special reference to the holiday season such as handkerchiefs, gents’ neckwear, gloves, shawls, silks and velvets, ribbons, notions, fans, laces, wool yarns, articles for fancy work, crockery and glassware.

J.D. Cerkels featured 1,000 varieties of toys; buggies, wagons, dolls, picture books, furniture sets, kitchen sets, tool chests, pianos, blocks, games, paints, scrapbooks, drums and magic lanterns.

The holiday season also marked the hunting season, and hunters from all over descended on Solano County, which was well noted for its fine duck hunting and

assortment of duck clubs.

On the day of feasting, the usual number of fowls were roasted in Dixon as elsewhere. Dixon had its Christmas tree at the Baptist Church. It was noted that the presents, while not as costly as in years past, were numerous, useful and appropriate.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were occasions for hitching the carriages and wagons and visiting neighbors. This was certainly the custom in the Bird's Landing/Collinsville area. That year in Collinsville there was also a party with a Christmas tree and lunch.

In Fairfield, 35 couples attended the Fairfield Christmas Ball.

New Year's Eve the local talent put on a play at the NSGW Hall in Suisun City, a two-act comedy drama entitled "Among the Breakers."

New Year's in Dixon was welcomed with the loud bangs of musketry firings and the ringing of bells. In fact, every church, school and fire bell was rung in unison.

Christmas shopping in 1899 was accomplished for some at a Christmas bazaar on Dec. 19, which was put on by the Women's Aid Society. Admission was 10 cents. Refreshments were free and fancy articles were offered for sale: items such as aprons and other useful articles that had been handmade by the ladies. That evening, the bazaar turned into a social gathering where coffee and other refreshments were sold.

By now, the economy was looking up, and the presents in Fairfield were better in both quality and quantity than what they had been in recent years. As proof, the pastor and his wife were recipients of several gifts, including a dozen Roger's solid-silver teaspoons.

For an admission fee of \$1, the locals could enjoy dancing to an orchestra from San Francisco at the Christmas Tree and Dance on Dec. 22 in Suisun City. A grand supper was served later in the evening.

To close the holidays and the century, New Year's Day 1900 was celebrated with services at many of the churches in Solano County.

Apologies to the ladies of Suisun who worked so hard to put on the most successful Ladies' Festival & Ball on Dec. 23, 1864, and not Dec. 28 as reported by this muddled writer.

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