

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Christmas and New Years in 1868"

Carroll County Times article for 31 December 1995

By Jay A. Graybeal

One of the earliest descriptions of a Carroll County Christmas can be found in an 1868 letter written by Miss Mary B. Shellman (1849-1938) of Westminster to her brother James. Miss Shellman copied her letter in a school composition book which is part of an extensive collection of material in the Society's collection related to this family. Her letter presents a lengthy description of the holiday season as enjoyed by Westminster's gentry:

James M. Shellman

Patapsco Neck

Baltimore Co.

Snobbery, Westminster, Jan. 11, 1868

My Dear Brother,

Is it too late to wish you a "Merry Christmas" and happy New Year? But I reckon you enjoyed the former heartily, as they know how to make Christmas very merry where you are. Some persons complained of spending a very quiet, dull Christmas here, but I think it was a very pleasant, gay one. Four parties in one week is doing very well for Westminster. Well I reckon you would like to have a full account of every thing that happened, so I will gratify you as well as I can. In the first place, the Monday before Christmas, I spent deep in the mysteries of cakes and pies, and Christmas Eve we were busy dressing the Church. Need I tell you that it looked like a little Paradise? We had early service on Christmas morning, and Church at 10 o'clock. I received some very pretty presents, among them a volume of beautiful German stories from Mr. Reese. The night after Christmas, I attended a party at Mrs. Roberts' and enjoyed it very much indeed. I never saw the girls look as well as they did that night. New Years Eve I attended another party at Mrs. Reese's where we danced the old year out, and the New Year in. A party of Masqueraders came in while we were there, but as I had seen them before, and they stayed so very long, they were very tiresome and stupid. Friday night we had our Masquerade at Mrs. Cunningham's. I went as the "Inquisitive Lady". My costume was lovely, but my mask was very comical. I wore a gray poplin skirt trimmed with scarlet braid, white fur and wide black lace. The fur and lace was put on in tunic style. A black velvet body, lace muff, blue satin, gold spangled bodice, and "Modina" cap completed my outfit. Some of the characters were very good. We had two from Dickens, "Dick Swiveller" and "Sam Weller", besides there was "Paul Pry", two "Turkish girls", the "Rose of Lucerne", the "Arkansas traveler," "Rip Van Winkle", "Osceola", "General Washington" and several others. Kate Massie was the "Rose of Lucerne" and she looked lovely. In fact, she was decidedly the prettiest girl in the room. There were a great many unmasked persons there but we were a very free and easy party and succeeded in playing "goose" as well as if all had been masked. We danced until eleven when we unmasked and proceeded to the Library where we found a table set out in Mrs. C's best style, and with every thing to tempt the appetite. Pyramids of ice cream smiling amid piles of many colored French candies, and golden balls of cake. But it is useless for me to describe one of her entertainments for they are all alike, inasmuch as they can not be surpassed. Saturday night I spent a delightful evening at Miss Harmickell's. There were a great many persons there, but only enough of us danced, to make a double set, and as we had violin music, and a large, square room to dance in we had a very nice time. The fifth party of the season we declined the invitation for the simple reason that Harry was too Radical to be expected, and where he can not go, we will not. The Fair lasted ten days, but I did not go up often. I did not enjoy it. They tell me

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you have out-grown your bashfulness. Let me congratulate you, "Brother mine," and also myself for I will be sure of an escort when you come home. I want to see you very much, Jim, so don't stay away long. I am going to bring Bessie Shepherd down at Easter and you must be prepared to come home with us. All join me in love to you and the rest. Excuse this uninteresting letter and write soon, to your loving sister.

"Mamie"

[Mary B.Shellman]

Although Miss Shellman described a joyous holiday season, she does reveal that Westminster society had yet to heal the wounds of the recent Civil War. Her reference to Harry being "too Radical" undoubtedly refers to her older brother Harry Jones Shellman and his political views. The reference suggests that Shellman was considered a Radical Republican and that he would have been unwelcome at a party hosted by a family who had sympathized with the South.

The Board and Staff of the Historical Society wish you an happy new year.

Photo caption:

Miss Mary B. Shellman (left) and friends Bessie Shepherd and Jessie Warfield Gorsuch posed for Westminster photographer J. W. Perkins on September 30, 1869. Young people such as Miss Shellman and her friends enjoyed masquerading and attending parties during the Christmas holiday season of 1867-8. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection, gift of Rev. Paul Reese, 1941.