

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Time for tree trimming traditions
by Joe Getty

Holiday customs serve an important role in making the changes of time in our personal lives as well as the history of our communities. This is especially true during our end-of-the-year holidays when we repeat rituals that continue local traditions in the home and community.

It is reassuring to return to these traditions each year that provide a connection with the past. As we prepare for the holidays, nostalgic images of past holiday celebrations fill our memories and provide a perspective by which we measure our personal accomplishments.

These recurring traditions follow a broad pattern of activities. It may be preparing holiday foods in the same manner as our parents or grandparents before us. Decorating traditions and the decorations themselves may provide special relationships to the past. Each new holiday brings back memories of special moments in our personal history.

One symbol of Christmas that has a significant secular tradition in Carroll County is the Christmas tree. Each generation teaches its children the preferences in choosing and trimming a tree. The image of the Christmas tree is prominent in family photographs, home movies and videotapes of past holiday celebrations.

Of special interest are the ornaments for the tree. Many families have ornaments that are cherished as if they were family heirlooms. Some were used by their parents and grandparents before them, and add special significance to the tree each year.

The Historical Society of Carroll County has an excellent collection of late 19th century tree ornaments. Brightly colored chromolithographs cut out and attached to tinsel were very popular. They covered a wide range of images including natural themes such as butterflies, and Christmas motifs such as angels, fairies, dolls and Santas. A more expensive ornament was the colored glass bulbs.

By the 1870s, national and local literature show that greater attention was being given to the trimming of Christmas trees. Publications and magazines provided instructions and ideas for creating tree ornaments of the best taste. A local newspaper commented on the beautiful large tree at the Dielman's Inn in New Windsor that featured a cupid on top and 100 tapers.

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By the turn-of-the-century, modern technology was influencing tree decorations. Miss Anna Heltibridle of Westminster contributed to the Historical Society a string of early electric lights. She also donated some tree ornaments including an unusual stuffed duckling. In a letter with the donation in 1961, Miss Heltibridle provides the following glimpse of early 20th century tree trimming traditions:

"In the year of 1913 when I was 11 years old, I came to the home of the Heltibridles. I had my first real large white pine Christmas tree. And that was the first year that the little electric lights were used on Christmas trees.

"They were a string of bulbs – we had 2 lines of 8 lights each on my tree (16 lights). They were the little old carbon types, not the modern G.E. that will burn on the G.E. lines. I have used them every Christmas from 1913 to 1957. I have a few of them left that I used that last year and they were all okay when I put them away. But I do not know how they are at present.

"I used them many years on my manger nativity set which was that old also, but I gave that away some years ago to a family of children who are still using and enjoying it even this year.

"There were beautiful ornaments – designs including 2 birds, a Baltimore oriole and a bright bluebird. There were pretty fruit bulbs, a pear and peach, very natural. And lovely flower designs, beautiful natural roses, white red and yellow, and the Santa Claus.

"And of course, the little plain bulbs of all colors: red, blue, green, yellow and clear white. Some of them have burned every Christmas for 44 years. Then the little duckling was a real live one stuffed. I do not know the history of the duck except it is very old for Mother and Daddie had it long before I ever knew them. I judge at present it is 75 or 80 years old."

A tradition closely related to the tree was the Christmas garden, usually a farm scene enclosed by a fence beneath the Christmas tree. Items in the local newspapers describe the creativity and innovations used in the fabrication of the garden, but we do not have in the Historical Society collection historic photographs of Carroll County Christmas gardens.

Electricity also influenced the design of the gardens under the tree, with the addition of the electric train. A 1908 newspaper describes a Westminster garden: "Harry Ryland, Liberty Street has one of the most magnificent Christmas trees in this city. It is simply covered with ornaments of every description. He has electrical works under the tree consisting of an electric line with a large car, which has 25 feet of track to run on, a station called Westminster, a village called Frizzellburg and supple jacks, machine shop and fountain all on the move by electric power. A

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house is lit up by electricity and garden surrounded by electric lights. A barn and animals have one end of the garden.”

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: Kate Getty Warner tries out her new tricycle in front of the trimmed Christmas tree in Manchester, 1961.