

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Shellman Family Christmas 1865"

Carroll County Times for 1 January 1995

by Jay A. Graybeal

Many of our modern day Christmas customs can be traced to the Victorian period. Decorating the house with greens, the Christmas tree and parties were all popular by the mid-nineteenth century. Some customs from this time period, however, have completely disappeared. Masquerading and performing tableaux, once extremely popular activities for young adults, did not remain part of our national traditions.

A letter written on January 6, 1866 by Miss Mary Bostwick Shellman of Westminster described how the Christmas and New Year's holidays were celebrated in Westminster:

Miss Mary B. Tyson

Patrick St.

Frederick City

My Dear Puss,

I am almost afraid to write you, it has been so long since I received your last, but if you will forgive me this time, I will promise to be more prompt in [the] future. Well I reckon Christmas, and Christmas gifts are the common topics of conversation now, so I will begin by asking, how many, and of what nature were your presents? Did Coz. give you the skates he promised you, and have you learnt to skate? Ma gave me a nice pair of skating boots, I intend to live in hopes, that my good fairy will appear with a pair of skates for me before the winter is over. You know "it is better to live in hope, if you do die in despair." I have had a delightful Christmas. In the first place, Christmas Eve we were all,

As busy as bees,
Standing in Ever-green,
Up to our knees.

We have the library dressed beautifully. We have wreaths round all the large pictures, and over the windows and doors. Over the small pictures we have bunches of ivy, and over the mantel, in the form of an arch, and made of evergreen, is "Merry Christmas." Our dear, little church looks like a little paradise. It is dressed simply, but beautifully. Christmas night I spent at a Christmas party at Dr. Butler's, and would you believe it, danced every set with a returned Reb. Wednesday night we had Tableaux, and I stood as bride with the same Reb, in a Tableaux called, "The Wedding." The Tableaux all passed off splendidly, tho' we only had one day to prepare. The next day I went to the Country, and stayed two or three days, and had a delightful visit. New Year's Eve I again spent the evening at Dr. Butler's, but this time in masquerade, as a dancing girl, and fortune teller, and must I confess it, again danced every set with the same, identical Reb. I was very anxious to fulfill an engagement for the "Virginia Reel," with quite as untamed a Reb as the former, but unfortunately, the party were too tired to dance it, and we couldn't conveniently dance it alone, so I was denied that pleasure. After seeing the Old Year out, we left for home quite a "used up" party. New Year's day I stayed in the house, lamenting over my swelled ankle, caused by walking so much during the day, and then dancing so constantly in the evening. It was swelled so I couldn't wear a good shoe, and went limping about for two days. So you see, I paid for my pleasure. But I mustn't forget to tell you, that I entirely forgot this pain New Year's morning on account

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of a visit I received from my "fair haired friend." It was quite delightful, tho' he was only in town about an hour. However he promised to come down again before he left for College, and then I will have the pleasure of meeting his Western friend, and room-mate. I am anxiously expecting my Western Christmas gifts, as one is to be so particularly nice. But I am sleepy, so "Good Night." Love to Reif's, Schley's, and my Cousins over the way, not for-getting our mutual friends, John and Joe. Remember me to Marie Falconer and write soon, and tell me all the Frederick news. Tell Cuz Jake, I say, "I wish I had a pair of skates," and that he must learn to take hints.

Please write soon,
and believe me,
Your loving Cousin
Moll.

Miss Shellman submitted her letter as part of her school work at the Female Collegiate and Male Academic Institute conducted by Professor John A. Monroe. Professor Monroe's school was located in a brick building which still stands at the entrance to the Westminster Cemetery.

The writer would like to thank Historical Society volunteer Duane Doxzen for transcribing Miss Shellman's letter for this article.

Happy Holidays from the Board and staff of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Photo Caption: Miss Mary Manning's Algebra Class, Female Collegiate Institute, Westminster, September 1867. Miss Mary B. Shellman stands at far right; with her are fellow students M. Bessie Shepherd, H. Kate Ball and Annie R. Yingling. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection, gift of Rev. Paul Reese, 1949.