

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Preparations of Christmases Past"

Carroll County Times Article for 10 December 1995

By Jay A. Graybeal

This time of year has traditionally been reserved for making Christmas preparations. One tradition which has remained unchanged for more than a century is the custom of writing to Santa Clause. Perhaps the earliest surviving letter by a local child is a composition by Miss Mary B. Shellman of Westminster. Written in 1867 when she was fourteen years old, Miss Shellman's letter illustrates that the familiar image of Santa had become a central figure in American Christmas celebrations by the 1860s.

Snobbery, Jan. 2, 1867

My Dear Santa Claus,

What better use can I make of my time, than writing to you, my dear, old friend! How can I thank you for the many merry times you have helped me to enjoy? Let me ask you one question, and then I will tell you what a very merry time I have had this Christmas. Do you ever get out of humor, or cross with anyone? Dear, old soul how many hearts you gladden. What a dry, sad time we would have if it were not for you! It would be much harder for us to part with our friend the old year, if we had no good Santa Klaus to make us a visit with his pretty gifts, which he never forgets; his Christmas trees, and merry band of Kris Kringles. I have been looking at Nast's great pictures, "Santa Klaus at home, Santa Klaus looking for bad children, Santa Klaus village", and all his pretty reminders of you, our dearest, best friend. I particularly enjoyed the picture of "Santa Claus village," especially where the wooden cow is kicking the wooden woman. It seems to be going about it in such a business like way, not caring a whit for the grace she might possibly show in the performance. But I said I would tell you how I spent my Christmas, and here I have just been telling how good you are and how much every one loved you, and not one word about what you don't know already.

An interesting Christmas custom of the past in Carroll County which is no longer practiced was masquerading or Kris Kringling. In the weeks preceding Christmas, the young people of the community would prepare their costumes and skits. Dressed in costume they would go door to door providing entertainments. In return, the household which had just been entertained by the Kris Kringlers would provide refreshments. The costumes would range from literary figures to historical personages as well as fanciful clothing. Mary Shellman's writings mention the Kris Kringling tradition. In a letter to her brother James, she described the characters of an entourage in which she played the "Inquisitive Lady": 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 Traveller," "Rip Van Winkle", "Osceola", "General Washington" and several others.

Additional information about Christmas customs can be found in the pages of our local newspapers. These sources reveal that the masqueraders were at times unruly, as reported in the January 3, 1873 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

Christmas - The day was generally observed, and pleasantly spent by many in making Christmas calls. From early in the morning until late in the evening, 'Young America' amused themselves by firing crackers, blowing horns and enjoying themselves generally. Christmas masqueraders were out in full force on Wednesday [December 24] and Thursday [December 25] nights. If they would behave with

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more propriety when entering the residences of our citizens, they would be treated better, but as it is they seem to take the occasion for showing how rudely they can misbehave.

It is, of course, in the tradition of Mary Shellman to take a bad situation and turn it into something good and for the public benefit. It appears that she reformed at least some of the masqueraders into singing carols and collecting money for the poor. The Democratic Advocate of January 4, 1879 noted:

A baker's dozen of merry maskers, composed of ladies and gentlemen, went from house to house on New Year's Eve, singing New Year's carols. They bore a small white banner inscribed 'Happy New Year' and another 'Remember the Poor,' also a box inscribed 'For Charity.' They realized ten dollars and the money was expended on New Year's Day in gifts to the poor, deserving and sick children. Miss Mary B. Shellman, always foremost in affairs of this nature, led the party. Presents were dispensed to thirty children.

While some traditions, such as masquerading, have not survived, looking after the needs of local needy families is still a part of the Carroll County Christmas.

Photo Caption: Miss Mary B. Shellman of Westminster played a prominent role in the cultural life of her community in the late nineteenth century. Her writings provide information about many aspects of daily life including how Christmas was observed. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Rev. Paul Reese, 1941.