

Carroll Yesteryears
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Echoes of Christmas Dinners Past
By Lee Magnuson

Christmas, New Year's, and Winter Solstice traditions abound around the world. Some activities associated with the season seem perfectly current and modern to us, but many have roots in far places and ancient times. Ingrained religious rituals, music, symbolic decorations, quirky games, and especially favorite foods hold special memories in most of our hearts. What are the edible holiday "must have" dishes in your family or community? Do you know how and when they became part of your family celebrations? Many of us feel "Christmas just can't happen" without certain things on the holiday table. Carroll County is lucky to have delectable favorites of many origins.

A centerpiece of a big stuffed turkey for Christmas dinner may be one of the oldest, as well as most local, main courses. Plentiful on the American eastern seaboard, native wild turkeys have been popular holiday menu items since mention by the Pilgrims at Plymouth, and long before that to the native peoples. Introduced to Europe by early explorers, turkeys had become domesticated barnyard poultry by the 1800s.

The Carroll County *Democratic Advocate* of December 23, 1893, declared "Carroll turkeys have the preference in Baltimore markets. Wesley Biggs sold six turkeys with a combined weight of 114 pounds." (an average of 19+ pounds each) Stuffings for turkeys ranged from a "Maryland recipe" of bread, the turkey liver, minced ham, and herbs, to combinations of native chestnut, sweet potato with sausage, oyster, cornbread, or mashed potatoes. An 1805 cookbook owned by Mrs. Gist of Westminster in the 1860s has an elaborate recipe involving boning the turkey, filling it with ground veal or chicken and sewing it up to "resemble its original shape."

Folks who didn't raise or purchase a turkey may have enjoyed goose, duck, ham, roast beef, and most likely small and big game if they had hunters in the family. The *Democratic Advocate* of 1875 reported "Andrew Groff of Littlestown shot 400 partridges and 50 rabbits" by January that winter. Some of those birds and bunnies could have gone to market for Christmas dinners.

The menu item competing in popularity with turkey for holiday dinners was definitely oysters. In January of 1875 "the oyster festival at the Baptist Church continued for three nights during Christmas week." The paper also reported that "Mr. McElroy afforded another chance at his fine Cherry stone oysters." One family history reported "Father always brought a barrel of oysters from Baltimore and we had oyster stew for Christmas breakfast and fried oysters and turkey for dinner."

Alongside the turkey the Pennsylvania German sauerkraut remains popular to this day, and cranberries grew and were marketed from "cranberry valley on the Schaffer holdings" near the site of our Cranberry Square. Winter vegetables from the cellar, or summer bounty canned and pulled from the pantry, completed the offerings. Dried sweet corn, soaked and stewed, and mashed turnips with bacon fat, sugar and vinegar, are still enjoyed by some families.

After the “turkey and fixin’s” were consumed, the multitude of holiday desserts appeared. Sometimes they came to the table immediately, but could have waited until after a digestive break of a few hours. The much loved (or loathed) fruitcakes, baked weeks in advance and aged in a shroud of rum-soaked cloth, emerged from their tin boxes. Sometimes iced with a brittle frosting, they could be light or dark in color, with varied ingredients. In 1893 John J. Reese’s shop at 294 E. Main in Westminster advertised “raisins, figs, currants, dates, coconuts, almonds, walnuts, prunes, peaches(dried?), apricots, oranges, lemons and molasses,” sufficient for most any fruitcake recipe.

Layer cakes, or “high cakes” in Pennsylvania German parlance, were held in high esteem. Families had their favorites, some with whimsical names like “Molly Green’s fig, Seven Seas, Ambrosia, and Lady Baltimore.” Many recipes specified “fillings” with dried and candied fruits in frostings between layers. Plates of slices of favorite cakes not served after dinner were often traded between friends and neighbors door to door. This custom resembles the cookie exchanges still popular today.

Pies also held their own on the dessert buffet. Mincemeat pie is most often associated with Christmas. Descended from medieval English “sweet and savory” meat pies, they evolved into desserts. Until fairly recently they usually contained meat and beef suet with the sweet fruits and spices, and plenty of rum and brandy, and mellowed for a time in crocks in the cellar. Mr. Reese, mentioned above, also offered the “best mincemeat at 12½ cents a pound.” The ground or chopped meats in the recipes could be beef, venison, or boiled tongue. Today’s versions are usually all fruit, without meat or suet. Steamed plum puddings, another English tradition, have also been mentioned locally. They date from the time when few people had bake ovens. Mostly raisins (not plums) and enriched with suet, they were boiled or steamed in a cloth bag or metal mold for hours, and ceremoniously brought to the table with a sprig of holly on top, aflame with brandy.

This brings us to the array of ever-present seasonal cookies. Pennsylvania German tastes still dominate the cookie recipes in Carroll County. Sandtarts top the list in old cookbooks and with traditional local cooks. Competitions among family members for the “maker of the thinnest sandtarts” persist, with the standard being “thin as a dime, or thinner.” Other favorites include lebkuchen, gingerbread men and animals, pfeffernusse, ginger or brandy snaps. Cookies could be used as tree ornaments, given as gifts, or served with coffee to holiday callers.

Today we enjoy oranges year-round, but for centuries they were rare, imported, expensive treats appearing mainly at Christmas. The orange in the toe of the stocking “hung by the chimney with care” might have been the only one a child ate all year. They were distributed at Christmas to employees, servants free and enslaved, and gifted at home by the mid-1800s. An encamped Civil War soldier wrote poignantly to his family from his tent, “I guess we will have hard tack and pork instead of oranges and cake” to decorate a makeshift little tree. Some scholars suggest that oranges are a symbol of the bags of gold given by the original St. Nicholas. Across the country Santa’s visit to towns on a truck, wagon, or fire-engine still includes a gift bag of nuts, candy, and an orange handed to eager children.

Carroll County, agriculturally prosperous and advantageously located, has attracted settlers from many directions and origins, resulting in a melding of customs and culinary tastes for almost two hundred years. Sharing favorite dishes with family and friends, others in need, and supporting community events like church dinners, charitable fund- raisers and cultural programs, brings out the best in all of us, and broaden our knowledge and understanding of each other. An 1893 news story reported the Christmas program at the County Almshouse culminated with a turkey dinner and “the little ones remembered with dolls, and the sick and infirm with delicacies.” What better way have we to celebrate the spirit of Christmas season than feasting with family and sharing our bounty and “delicacies” with those around us?

Guest columnist Lee Magnuson is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County with an interest in historic and regional foodways.



Image: Credit: Harper's Weekly, January 6, 1877

Caption: This 1877 drawing from Harper's Weekly shows Santa bringing an assortment of food, drink, and stockings to a lucky family.