

MINNESOTA HISTORY

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 16

DECEMBER, 1935

NUMBER 4

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S ON THE FRONTIER

“Christmas Day: Serenade this morning at 3 ocl^k by the musicians from Fort Snelling.” Thus reads part of an entry for December 25, 1827, in a diary, now faded and yellow with age, kept at old Fort Snelling by Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at the post for two decades after 1819. The early morning serenade was merely a prelude to the events of that Christmas Day of 1827. At daylight there were “3 Rounds by the French Inhabitants of the Post with the usual complements [*sic*] of the Season.” And then the “Indians both men & women called at 11 ocl^k . . . in considerable numbers to see & shake hands & express the feelings of the day—which they appear to have taken up within the last Eight years from the Whites. The feelings of their hearts were expressed before I was aware,” writes Taliaferro, “by a few *Yellow Kisses*—& *amusing Scene*.” Year after year, as the agent continued in office at Fort Snelling, the Indians appeared at his door on Christmas morning. By 1836 he must have been heartily tired of the yuletide attentions of the Indian women, for on December 25 of that year he complained: “had of course to undergo various salutations on the *cheek* from many & old as well as young women—a custom derived from our Canadian population—not a very agreeable one.”¹

¹Unless otherwise indicated, manuscripts cited in this article are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Taliaferro might have observed that the Indians took over from the Catholic French-Canadians the idea and the method of celebrating both Christmas and New Year's. From the land to the north, the fur trade attracted to the Minnesota country hundreds of these people, most of whom served as voyageurs, or boatmen. Their daily work brought them into close contact with the natives. To the voyageur the midwinter holidays were gala occasions, days for merrymaking, for "drinking and fighting," for feasting and dancing. One trader described a Christmas ball where the "main point to which the dancers' efforts seemed to tend, was to get the largest amount of exercise out of every muscle in the frame." The dancing was done to the music of "one vile, unvarying tune, upon a worse old fiddle," with a "brilliant accompaniment upon a large tin pan." John McKay, a trader who had charge of a post for the Hudson's Bay Company on Rainy Lake, entertained a rival trader of the Northwest Company and his family at breakfast and dinner on Christmas Day in 1794. In the evening his guest invited him with his men to a dance, but, recorded McKay, "the Negroe who played on the fiddle got beastly drunk and spoiled our diversion." The daily diet of the voyageur was corn and suet, which was furnished by his employer; on Christmas, New Year's, and other holidays he was given sugar, flour with which to make cakes or puddings, a measure of rum, and other luxuries reserved for special occasions. McKay gave his men seven quarts of brandy on Christmas, 1793, and again on New Year's, 1794. The men who braved a Minnesota winter to explore the snow-covered plains and forests and frozen rivers of the North observed Christmas in much the same way as did the voyageurs. Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, who set out in December, 1805, from his fort near Little Falls in an effort to find the source of the Mississippi, on the twenty-fifth "Gave out two pounds of extra meat, two pounds of

extra flour, one gill of whisky, and some tobacco" to each member of his expedition, "in order to distinguish Christmas."²

When missionaries began to work among the Minnesota Indians, particularly among the Chippewa of the North, they found that the natives made much of New Year's Day. They celebrated the holiday, which they called "Kissing day," after the manner of the French-Canadian traders and voyageurs. The puritanical religious leaders often were obliged, much against their wishes, to observe the day in the native manner. William T. Boutwell, who went to Leech Lake in 1833, found that the Indians there were in the habit of visiting the resident trader on January 1 to receive presents, "when all, male and female, old and young, must give and receive a kiss, a cake, or something else." They seemed to expect similar treatment from Boutwell, for on the first day of 1834 they caused the pious missionary considerable annoyance by appearing at his cabin at breakfast time. He relates the story as follows:

Open came our door, and in came 5 or 6 women and as many children. An old squaw, with clean face, for once, came up and saluted me with, "bon jour," giving her hand at the same time, which I received, returning her compliment, "bon jour." But this was not all. She had been too long among Canadians not to learn some of their New Year Customs. She approached — approached so near, to give and receive a kiss, that I was obliged to give her a slip, and dodge! This vexed the old lady and provoked her to say, that I thought her too dirty. But pleased, or displeased, I was determined to give no countenance to a custom which I hated more than dirt.³

At Red Lake twelve years later a band of missionaries planned a New Year's celebration which seemed to please

² Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur*, 83-85 (New York, 1931); Zebulon M. Pike, *Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, 1:130 (Coles edition — New York, 1895). Extracts from McKay's diary, in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, London, have been made by Miss Nute and are now on file with the Minnesota Historical Society. References to the diary are published by permission of the governor and committee of the Hudson's Bay Company.

³ Boutwell Diary, January 1, 1834.

the natives, who "honored" them "with a salute of two guns." The missionaries at this place recognized the Indian custom and took part in the celebration. According to Lucy M. Lewis, the wife of one of the missionaries, all the mission workers gathered at early dawn at the house of their leader, "the most convenient place to meet the Indians who assemble to give the greeting and receive a cake or two & a draught of sweetened water. It is the custom through the country to make calls & receive cakes." But instead of offering kisses, these Indians sang a "New Year's hymn learned in school for the occasion." The Red Lake missionaries marked New Year's Eve by assembling the pupils of the mission school and giving them presents. In 1845 the gifts consisted of flannel shirts for the boys and "short gowns" for the girls. The Indian children "came with cleaner faces & hands than usual," writes Mrs. Lewis, "as a little soap had previously been distributed." The custom of giving the Indians presents during the holiday season was continued by later missionaries, and it doubtless had an influence in creating good will. In 1881 Bishop Whipple, "with his usual kindness, sent an abundant supply of Christmas candy to all the Indian churches and stations" of the Episcopal church in northern Minnesota. A hundred pounds was sent to White Earth, and fifty pounds each to several other stations, including those at Red and Leech lakes. This, according to one writer, "was enough to sweeten the whole Ojibway nation and gave many an Indian boy and girl and man and woman the only taste of candy they have during the year. It made a great many people happy."⁴

While missionaries were introducing the white man's customs in northern Minnesota, settlement was progressing in the southern part of the territory, and a few well-defined

⁴ Lucy M. Lewis to Clarisse W. Burrell, January 1, 1846, Lewis Papers; Sela G. Wright to J. P. Bardwell, December 25, 1845, in *Oberlin Evangelist*, 3: 46, 47, 63; *Minnesota Missionary*, vol. 4, no. 6, p. 2 (March, 1881).

communities that were to become cities were established. They were peopled by newcomers, many of whom came from New England or other parts of the East, bringing with them the social customs of their old homes. By 1850 the gay and often crude Christmas celebration of the voyageur and the Indian had been replaced in Minnesota by a more conventional and refined holiday. The observance was, however, far from puritanical. People went to church on Christmas, but they also attended balls or other parties "gotten up with as much elegance and taste as can be displayed in any of the great cities," they arranged for amateur theatricals and community Christmas trees, and they enjoyed elaborate dinners. In St. Paul, according to a statement in a local newspaper, the Christmas season of 1850 was "rich in social entertainments and interesting religious exercises."

A "Grand Christmas Ball" at the Minnesota House in Stillwater was the "great centre of attraction" for "those who love worldly pleasure" during the holiday season of 1849. W. E. Hartshorn, the proprietor of the hotel, announced that he planned to "surpass anything of the kind yet got up in the Territory," which was then only eight months old. A week later St. Paulites saw the New Year in at a ball held at the Central House, where a local editor witnessed the "largest collection of beauty and of fashion we have ever seen in the West." A ball at Moffet's hotel in St. Paul ushered in the Christmas festivities of 1850. On the following night there was a ball of "unusual splendor" at Brewster's hotel in Stillwater, which was "attended by more than one hundred gentlemen and ladies, eight cotillions occupying the floor at once." A year later the holiday season was inaugurated a few days before Christmas in St. Paul by a "Ladies' Fair" held in Charles H. Oakes's "large, new elegant mansion house, well warmed and illuminated from the basement up to the observatory." An

idea of pioneer St. Paul society may be gained from a contemporary report of this affair. The gathering was one of "intelligence and real respectability," made up of "beautiful, well dressed women and girls" and "genteel and accomplished men." They displayed "an easy elegance of manners and a pleasant tone of refined conversation, that was truly delightful." A frontier editor left the fair "with a better opinion of the elements of society in St. Paul and higher hopes of the early predominance here, of a christian spirit of enlightened morality and high-toned civilization."⁵

One of the forms of entertainment provided for guests at this Christmas fair was a post office, "where pertinent, ludicrous and appropriate letters could be obtained." The celebration reached its climax, however, in a supper, at which tables were arranged for "one hundred persons, in a style of sumptuous elegance." Turkeys, chickens, frosted hams, "the more staple meats, including buffalo tongue," oyster soup, lobster soup, sardines, pastries, sauces, ice cream, jellies, and "piquants of every description" were among the dishes served. It is evident that delicacies were not lacking on the frontier Christmas table. Another St. Paul menu of 1851 included chicken, ham, turkey, lobster, oysters, sardines, buffalo tongues, pastries, jellies, pecans, and ice cream. In that year turkeys, brought in by sleigh from Iowa and Illinois, sold in St. Paul for \$1.50 and \$2.00 each. Many a pioneer family, however, sat down to a holiday table that was not graced by the king of birds. On Thanksgiving Day, 1850, which was celebrated in that year on December 26, a Minneapolis family had a dinner of stewed oysters, boiled vegetables, baked pork and beans, cranberries, mince and cranberry pies, cheese, and nuts. The cranberries gave to the meal a distinctly local flavor,

⁵ *Minnesota Chronicle and Register* (St. Paul), December 22, 1849; *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), January 2, 1850; January 2, December 25, 1851.

for they grew wild in many parts of Minnesota. One Minneapolis pioneer recalls that he picked the cranberries for his Christmas dinner of 1848 "in what is now Columbia Heights," where the "bushes were loaded with them." Other frontier products found a place on many a menu. A Christmas dinner served in Fillmore County in 1854 included bear meat, prairie chicken, and venison. The bear meat was furnished by an Indian chief, who with his squaw and six warriors joined the white settlers of the vicinity for a yule celebration. After dinner the Indians entertained their hosts with races, a ball game, and dances. Among the dishes served at a Christmas gathering in 1852 at Winona, which was then known as Wabasha Prairie, were wild goose, venison, and coon. The menu included also five kinds of cake, three kinds of pie, and doughnuts fried in coon's grease. Visitors to the home of Governor Alexander Ramsey during the holiday season of 1850 dined "on a saddle of venison." Turkeys were served regularly on Christmas in the home of Ignatius Donnelly at Nininger in the seventies. On his holiday table there appeared also such delicacies as wine, homemade cider, and mince pie.⁶

Luxuries seem to have found their way even to the remote Minnesota frontier. At Crow Wing near Fort Ripley on the upper Mississippi in 1860 a Christmas dinner of oyster soup, roast turkey, plum pudding, coffee, and "fix-ins" was enjoyed by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel B. Abbe and their guests. The oysters had been sent to Mrs. Abbe by a friend at St. Cloud. With her husband she had only recently removed from St. Paul to Crow Wing, where he was a trader and a townsite promoter. Their first Christmas at this remote post was far from lonely. A few days before the holiday they attended a party at the home of

⁶*Pioneer*, December 25, 1851; *Minneapolis Journal*, December 26, 1920; "A Christmas Dinner," in Orrin F. Smith Papers, Miscellaneous, 1852-1932; Evadene A. Burris, "Frontier Food," *ante*, 14: 391; Ramsey Diary, December 28, 1850; Donnelly Diary, December 25, 1873, 1879.

Clement H. Beaulieu, a French and Indian mixed-blood who was a trader at Crow Wing. He "sent to St. Cloud (eighty miles) for music." In a letter written on December 30, 1860, Mrs. Abbe reports that her host served "an elegant supper," and though she did not consider the party "quite as elegant as some of our St P[aul] affairs of the kind [it] was n[o]t to be despised. The garrison were all present & all down from the Agency . . . and the *arrows*-stocracy of Crow Wing."⁷ After church services on Christmas morning the Reverend and Mrs. E. S. Peake, local missionaries of the Episcopal church, went home to dinner with the Abbes. In the evening they all attended a party at Fort Ripley, where there was a Christmas tree, and where Mrs. Abbe received a "very pretty embroidered cushion" and her husband "came into possession of a watch case with a mouse in it." Among the guests were the wives and daughters of the commandant and the post surgeon, and six or seven bachelors. "The young ladies are having a good time generally," comments Mrs. Abbe. She herself approved of only one or two of the young men; the others she found "like the rest of the brass buttons."

On Christmas morning "the grave and devout will be at church," wrote an editor of 1849. Church-going was a natural part of the frontier holiday observance; in fact, it was taken for granted and was seldom a subject of comment. A Swedish Lutheran pastor who arrived in Minnesota late in 1857 preached in St. Paul on the Sunday before Christmas, at Scandia two days before the holiday, and at both East and West Union on Christmas Day. He complained that he found it necessary to prepare his sermon in a saloon near Shakopee, "where several drunkards made a lot of disturbance until late at night." At Fari-bault the yule celebration began in the Episcopal Cathedral at six in the morning with a carol service, which by the late

⁷ Mrs. Abbe's letter is among the Fuller Family Papers.

seventies was looked upon as "one of the time-honored customs of the parish." The Cathedral was always decorated for the holiday; on one occasion it was banked with evergreen and the "chancel was literally ablaze with the light of gas burners and tapers." One parishioner records that the carols heard at this service "were old and familiar Christmas songs, many of which were learned by most of us as Sunday school children in the far off parishes of Eastern cities and villages." At Morris in 1882 an Episcopal congregation that had been organized only a year earlier had a Christmas festival that "drew forth a glad observance of its sacred memorials. The church and chancel were made both beautiful and fragrant by wreaths and festoons of evergreen; and the service enlivened by rich anthems of praise."⁸

In many frontier homes children received Christmas gifts, but some pioneers found it impossible to provide even such simple objects as homemade toys, popcorn balls, and candy. They told the disappointed youngsters that "it had been a bad year for Santa Claus' business" or that "Santa Claus has not learned the way up to Minnesota yet." A pioneer woman who passed her childhood near Le Sueur recalls that the Christmas of 1861 was an especially thrilling one, for she received a "pink calico apron, a stick of striped candy, an apple, and a doll about seven inches long, with china head, hands, and feet." She records that the doll was "the first and only one" she ever had. A decade later, a community Christmas celebrated in a schoolhouse near Silver Lake in Martin County was marked by a "graceful red cedar well lighted with candles and well loaded with presents, as was also a table nearby, and the floor." Bushels of popcorn balls were piled beneath the tree, which was

⁸ Alfred Bergin, "The Westgoths in Minnesota," in *Weekly Valley Herald* (Chaska), July 25, 1935; *Minnesota Missionary*, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 4 (January, 1878); vol. 5, no. 3, p. 5 (December, 1881); vol. 5, no. 4, p. 2 (January, 1882); vol. 8, no. 1, p. 1 (January, 1884).

loaded with stockings made of mosquito netting by the women of the neighborhood and filled with candy, nuts, and popcorn. Among the gifts were mittens, suspenders, leg-gings, neckties, slippers, dolls, drums, dolls' clothing, books, pictures, boots, and other articles of clothing. In order to provide decorations for a Christmas tree at old Fort Garry, near the present site of Winnipeg, "tin foil and gilt paper were stripped off packages in the shop and twisted into fantastic shapes, bright beads and berries were strung upon cords, slices of yellow soap were cut into hearts, stars, etc., carefully covered with coloured paper, candles cut down and fitted into holders made by the tinsmith."⁹

Gifts received by adults were worthy of note. Governor Ramsey records in his diary for December 25, 1850—the first Christmas that he spent in Minnesota—that he received "as a Christmas present a fine long sleeved pair of fur gloves and a pretty segar case." He notes also that a prominent St. Paul man presented Mrs. Ramsey with a "very handsome painting in a gilt frame, lady shading her face with a fan." A variety of gifts could be purchased in the local shops. In 1849 St. Paul merchants, confectioners, and bakers were prepared for the holiday trade. They advertised among other things stocks of cigars, tobacco, pipes, toys, "fancy dry goods," and Christmas cakes. "But if all our St. Paul merchants fail to supply you with what you want," a local paper suggested, "just step up to the Sutler's store, at Fort Snelling." A stock of goods received by one St. Paul shop just before Christmas, 1850, was brought up the river as far as Red Wing by steamboat and transported from there on the ice. As time went on the custom of giving presents to both young and old became an established one, and merchants continued to cater to the

⁹ Alice Mendenhall George, *The Story of My Childhood*, 35 (Whittier, California, 1923); Britania J. Livingston, "Letters from a Pioneer Woman," in *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, June 6, 1925; Mitchell Young Jackson Diary, December 24, 1854; Anna M. Cowan, "Memories of Upper Fort Garry," in the *Beaver*, September, 1935.

holiday trade. A Swedish traveler who was in St. Paul a few days before a Christmas of the early seventies remarked upon the "newly arrived articles . . . intended as gifts for the coming holidays" to be found in the local stores. The "number and costliness" of the gifts exchanged by Americans amazed him. "The presents are sent with a message if the giver is someone outside the family," he explains, "or they are distributed by a dressed-up Christmas mummer, who here goes under the name of 'Santa Claus.'" An unusual gift received by a minister at Sauk Center from his congregation in 1882 was a "Christmas card, the design upon which consisted of a unique arrangement of seventy-five dollars and fifty cents in gold and silver coin."¹⁰

Amateur theatrical performances sometimes marked the holiday season. The people of Hastings assembled at Burges' Hall on Christmas Eve of 1857 to witness a "grand musical festival" entitled "The Flower Queen." The rose, the lily, the crocus, the violet, and the like were impersonated by members of a "juvenile singing class connected with the Dakota Institute." On what was, in all likelihood, a frigid winter night, these youthful Minnesota pioneers sang:

We are the flowers, the fair young flowers,
That come at the voice of Spring.

Only seven years after the railway village of Glyndon in Clay County was platted, on December 24, 1879, a playlet known as the "House of Santa Claus" was produced there for the local Sunday school children. Despite a temperature of thirty-five degrees below zero, the youngsters turned

¹⁰The traveler was Hugo Nisbeth, whose account of a visit to Minnesota, published at Stockholm in 1874, appears in a translation by Roy W. Swanson under the title "A Swedish Visitor of the Early Seventies," *ante*, 8: 386-421. Nisbeth's remarks about the American Christmas appear on page 413. See also *Chronicle and Register*, December 22, 1849; *Minnesota Democrat*, December 24, 1850; *Minnesota Missionary*, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 5 (January, 1882).

out to see this play, sing Christmas anthems, and receive gifts and sweetmeats. At a masquerade given at Dodge Center on Christmas night, 1882, one of the guests was dressed as Oscar Wilde, "knee breeches, big buckled shoes, low collar, sunflower and all," and two women appeared in costumes "composed entirely of newspapers, the fit and style being very elegant."¹¹

Sleigh rides often were planned for the Minnesota holiday season. A pioneer St. Anthony woman recalled that on Christmas Day, 1849, the young people of St. Anthony and St. Paul joined forces for a ride to a point nine miles above the falls. She relates that "The sleighing was fine, and being well protected with fur robes the drive was delightful." Rides from St. Paul upstream to Fort Snelling on the ice, or down the river to Red Rock or Point Douglas, or across country to Stillwater or St. Anthony, sometimes were arranged. "Away we go," writes one pioneer, "with bells jingling, horses blowing icicles from their nostrils—ladies alternately laughing and screaming . . . young men driving like Jehu." A sleighing party given in 1852 at Wabasha Prairie "had for its object the taking to ride in one sleigh of every lady then resident" in the settlement. "Stops were made at all the 'shanties' then on the prairie, and where occupants were found at home calls were made, while at the vacant ones the names of the callers were written in lead pencil upon the door."¹²

A sleigh ride was an enjoyable feature of a Christmas party given in 1866 in Minneapolis by Mr. and Mrs. John T. Blaisdell, and it was recalled many years later by one of the guests, Walter Stone Pardee, who in 1866 was a home-sick boy recently arrived from New England. He relates:

¹¹ *The Flower Queen* was published as a pamphlet of eighteen pages at Hastings in 1857. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy. See also *Red River Valley News* (Glyndon), December 26, 1879; *Dodge Center Index*, December 30, 1882.

¹² *Chronicle and Register*, December 22, 1849; "A Christmas Dinner," in Smith Papers.

Likely there were 20 children on hand. Long before dark Mr. Blaisdell got all who cared to go, into his big farm sleigh, that was bedded in straw, and he took us for a ride to the back of his farm, half a mile west, and this was at Lyndale Avenue of today. The air was crisp, clear and cold, and the boys and girls especially were wonderfully stimulated to enjoy the substantial food soon to be offered. The road was out of the common way. . . . Not a house was to be seen along the route . . . in the region where there are hundreds of costly homes. . . . But that 1866 afternoon our brisk team pulled us merrily along thru snow drifts on just plain farm upon much of which Mr. Blaisdell raised wheat. As to houses in sight even on Nicollet Avenue, there were only two or three such as would be on 160 acre farms. A little white school house some way out was the biggest building to be seen until far away at Lake Street were two or three farmhouses.

The farm in time became Blaisdell's Addition to the city of Minneapolis. After the invigorating ride, Blaisdell drove back to his "hospitable home," where the "New England supper came on." "The table was piled with the substantial and the fine," records Pardee. "As at Dave Harum's Christmas dinner, 'Sairy was for bringing in and taking out, but folks at table did their own passing.'" The feast was followed by a "jolly evening," with the "usual kissing games . . . sedate marchings about the big room and near-attempts at dancing." Pardee remarks that the Christmas affair pleased him, "for it was New England again."¹³

In frontier Minnesota calls were the order of the day on New Year's. "The custom of observing this day, after the old Dutch fashion, is becoming firmly established," reads a St. Paul newspaper of the early fifties. On the first day of the year "ladies remain at home and see company. Gentlemen make short calls, and take a slight refreshment everywhere." From ten in the morning to four in the afternoon were considered the proper hours for making calls. Propriety seems, however, to have been disregarded by some elements of the frontier population. Shortly after midnight of New Year's Eve in 1852, for example, Gover-

¹³ See Walter Stone Pardee's "Autobiography" in the Pardee Papers.

New-Year's Address

OF THE CARRIERS OF

The Saint Paul Daily Press.

1868.

THE CARRIER BOY

Is coming—look out!

He's crammed full of gossip, from cap to boot;
Sweeping up to your door with a clatter and bound,
Not afoot and alone, as he daily comes round,
But mounted, this time, sir, and booted and spurred;—

Yes, riding Pegasus, of whom you have heard.

He's a rickety, crotchety, Gothicized steed,
Looking the worse for hard work on small feed,
But strong enough, doubtless, to hobble along,
While his rider rehearses his

New-Year Song.

A song of blessings, and of beauties past,—
Of blessings poured upon our cherished land,
In-bounteous harvests, and unclouded peace;

THE FIRST PAGE OF A NEWSBOYS' GREETING, 1868

ginning of the year 1850 was observed by the Minnesota Historical Society, organized in the previous year, with special exercises held in the Methodist church of St. Paul. The Reverend Edward D. Neill, an active member of the new society, delivered an address "which was not merely instructive, but thrillingly eloquent," on the "French Voyageurs to Minnesota during the Seventeenth Century," and a band from Fort Snelling provided music. "Write your history as you go along, and you will confer a favor upon the future inhabitants of Minnesota," advised Neill. A gay New Year's ball at Shakopee in 1856 was given for the benefit of a missionary, Samuel W. Pond, and his home mission work. "I had nothing to do with it but to share in the spoils with the Fidler," was Pond's somewhat apologetic comment on the affair. On New Year's Day, 1878, a steamboat left the landing at St. Paul for a river excursion to Fort Snelling, its decks crowded with passengers clad in linen dusters and carrying palm-leaf fans. It may be imagined, however, that underneath the dusters were heavy, warm coats. The excursion was planned by a St. Paul real-estate dealer, who took advantage of unseasonable weather to advertise the Minnesota climate and "to deceive the eastern public into the belief that orange trees and magnolias are in full bloom in a Minnesota January as a regular thing."¹⁵

The traditional American custom of issuing a carriers' greeting at New Year's, long established by newspapers of the Atlantic coast, was adopted in pioneer Minnesota at an early date. On January 7, 1853, the *St. Anthony Express* circulated an "Address of the Carrier of the St. Anthony Express to His Patrons." In doggerel verse, the newsboys of the little community that is now a part of the city of Minneapolis voiced their hopes for the future:

¹⁵ *Pioneer*, January 2, 1850; January 3, 1878; Samuel W. Pond to Ruth Riggs, January 26, 1856, Pond Papers. Neill's address appears in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 17-36 (1872).

When five thousand souls our streets shall throng;
 And no one doubts but what they will ere long;
 We hope to leave you still the weekly news,
 To write your verses and collect our dues.

A Carriers' Address to the Patrons of the St. Paul Daily Press issued in 1866 expresses the gratitude "Of countless thousands that the war was done," and tells of

. . . that horrible and dark eclipse
 When, by a dastard's hand, our martyred chief
 Was foully murdered!

An Annual Address distributed by carriers of the *St. Paul Pioneer* in 1867 tells of a beautiful dream, in which a "guardian spirit" announced to the carrier:

The happy scenes thus pictured on New Year,
 Reflect the homes which take THE PIONEER.

The optimism of post-war Minnesota is reflected in the following lines:

Our busy merchants scarce find leisure
 To send to bank their surplus treasure.
 Mechanics, laborers, lawyers too,
 Find work enough for all to do,
 (Doctors sedate must find it funny,
 That they alone can't make much money.)¹⁸

By the middle sixties holiday celebrations in Minnesota were being influenced by people other than those from New England and the East. Europeans from England, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries were settling in the North Star State by the thousands, and each group brought from the homeland its own method of celebrating the winter holidays. Hugo Nisbeth, a Swedish traveler who visited Minnesota in 1872, commented: "It is not only the Scandinavians who celebrate Christmas here in America in

¹⁸ *St. Anthony Express*, January 7, 1853. Carriers' greetings of the *Falls Evening News and Minnesota Republican* of St. Anthony and Minneapolis for 1859, the *St. Paul Daily Press* for 1866 and 1868, and the *Pioneer* for 1867 are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

a true ancient northern fashion, but even the Americans themselves have in late years begun to give more and more attention to this festival of the children and have as nearly as possible taken our method of celebration as a pattern." He drove out onto the prairie near Litchfield, where he spent the Christmas holiday with one of his countrymen who was living in a sod house, built half above and half under ground.

Upon his return to Sweden, Nisbeth published a book about his travels in which he tells about the frontier festivities. The day before Christmas was spent in preparing for the celebration; among other things a "small sheaf of unthreshed wheat was set out for the few birds that at times circled around the house, in accordance with the lovely old Swedish custom." As in the fatherland, the principal celebration took place on Christmas Eve. "There was no Christmas tree, for fir trees are not yet planted in this part of Minnesota," he records, "but two candles stood on the white covered table and round these were placed a multitude of Christmas cakes in various shapes made by the housewife and such small presents as these pioneers were able to afford, to which I added those I had brought." Nisbeth was disappointed because the traditional Swedish Christmas dishes, *lutfsk* and rice porridge, were not served, but he observes that the "ham which took the place of honor in their stead banished all doubt that the settler's labor and sacrifice had not received its reward." After the meal the children were given their presents. "The gifts were neither costly nor tasteful, but they were *gifts* and that was all that was necessary," remarks Nisbeth. He relates that "on the wooden horse I had brought, the little three-year-old galloped over the hard-packed dirt floor of the sod house with as much joy and happiness undoubtedly as the pampered child upon one polished and upholstered."¹⁷

¹⁷ Nisbeth, *ante*, 8: 413-416.

The Christmas customs of the French-Canadian, of the New Englander and the Easterner, of the Scandinavian and the German, and of various other Europeans are among the contributions that these elements have made to Minnesota life. They transplanted, too, scores of other habits and characteristics, which, modified by the new environment, make up the social fabric of the North Star State.

BERTHA L. HEILBRON

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).