



# CHRISTMAS



# PAST

THE GHOST of Christmas past has not always summoned visions of sugarplums, groaning boards, or lavish gifts. For many Minnesotans whose childhood memories predated 1850, December 25 was more reminiscent of Puritan observance than the gay and often commercial festival of the mid-twentieth century.

In 1893, the *Minneapolis Journal* for Christmas Day published twelve recollections of "Yultides of Yore." Charles A. Pillsbury was one who remembered the holiday as "not half as much of a day as Thanksgiving," while Mrs. Thomas B. Walker recalled that her father was "of the sturdy Puritan stock" who had "a quarter of a notion it [*Christmas*] was a half-heathen, half-Catholic institution," and that, therefore, her childhood lacked "all pictures of Christmas time as a holiday."

Maria L. Sanford, renowned Minnesota educator, thinking back to 1842 in Connecticut when she was but six years old, had no illusions about Santa Claus. Her note to the *Journal* said: "We had never heard of Christmas trees; the idea of Christmas service or decoration or presents in the meeting house or for the Sabbath-school would have shocked the good people of our church and Christmas dinners would have been censured. . . . mother taught us to say, 'I wish you a *pleasant* Christmas,' we were too near to the Puritans to wish a 'merry' one." More secular, however, was



Miss Sanford's memory of "filling Father's stocking" with an apple and "a huge potato, full seven inches long." She added that the "most precious of my memories is of my mother's making, the day before Christmas, dainty little mince pies and quince tarts for us to give to our little friends. I never thought of it then but I see now that these went mostly to those of our playmates who were in some way unfortunate."

A leavening of the Puritan tradition was to be expected in a state which had experienced the waves of immigration from Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Dr. Martha G. Ripley remembered thinking that "Kris Kringle" was more in keeping with the holiday than "Santa Claus"; Mrs. Walker had longed to be "somebody's little 'Gretchen' away off in Germany where they had Christmas trees . . . the Angel of 'glad tidings' . . . the precious gifts on the tree."

Since before territorial days, more worldly celebrations had been held in Minnesota country, however. In 1854 the *St. Paul Daily Democrat* for December 26 reported on a party to which "a number of children were invited with their parents, and at seven o'clock, the door of the parlor was thrown open, presenting to the astonished gaze of the children, a Cristmas [*sic*] Tree, most brilliantly lighted and adorned with all sorts of presents. . . . This is a custom we believe peculiar to some countries in Europe, and one we would hope to see more generally adopted in this country."

By 1865 it was not uncommon to find notices such as one in the *Saint Paul Pioneer* of December 24: "Ho! Every One.— James Davis, at the 'Merchant's Exchange,' will continue his 'time-honored custom' of setting a Christmas Dinner, and having a barrell of Egg-Nogg, &c., for his customers. The fattest turkeys and venison will be served up for lunch, and choice liquor cheer the hearts of all who wish to celebrate Christmas in the 'old time style.'"





Injudicious reveling in that "old time style" may well have resulted in a front-page story in the Minneapolis *Evening Journal* on Christmas Day, 1886. The "holiday toot" led "drunks and disorderlies" to be "very saucy in the municipal court this morning. They attempted to bully the court. . . . It was a holiday drunk they had last night, they said, and by right of custom the law should not have stepped in and stopped their fun." Two of the celebrators got "exceedingly wrathful" and were dragged "to the station by the officers in a way that will have a tendency to give them a headache when they sober up."

Perhaps the offenders would have been wiser to have held their parties in St. Paul. The *Saint Paul Daily Dispatch* reported on Christmas Eve in 1879 that the "county jail is festooned in grand style, getting ready for to-morrow's festivities. At the further end of the right hand corridor is the motto, 'A Merry Christmas,' and on the other side, 'A Happy New Year.' Designs of various kinds and in different colors encircle these mottoes and are very neat and tasty. . . . The boys are to have a sumptuous repast."

Nearly a century ago, Hugo Nisbeth, a Swedish visitor to Minnesota, noting the European traditions that had been incorporated into Yul tide observance, commented on an American "liberality that would amaze us." Possibly the most American tradition to evolve from the melding of many cultures and customs is the freedom to "keep Christmas in your own way."

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THE ILLUSTRATIONS shown at the top of page 192 are from the *Minneapolis Journal* for December 19 and 20, 1890; that of Bridge Square in St. Paul, the family Christmas picture, and the candlelit tree above are in the collection of the society's picture department.



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