



Christmas in the Park: An historical perspective

By Marianne Mogon' Correspondent Dec 23, 2021

By the mid-1800s the American Christmas tradition included much of the same customs and festivities as it does today, including tree decorating, gift-giving, Santa Claus, greeting cards, stockings by the fire, church activities and family-oriented days of feasting and fun.

For most, at least those of the Christian faith, Christmas began well over 2000 years ago in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus Christ. It's not known for sure when celebrating really began, but in 350 AD Pope Julius I declared December 25 the official date and in 529 AD Emperor Justinian declared Christmas a civic holiday.

In America, as pilgrims began to come and settle, they brought along their own customs of celebration. The Christmas tree is credited to German immigrants and Pennsylvania German settlements had community trees as early as 1747. Decorations were mainly homemade and primarily consisted of brightly-colored ribbons, pieces of cloth, apples, nuts, popcorn and cranberries. By the 1890s, Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise throughout the United States.

Some used candles to add illumination, but since candles at that time were fairly expensive, they were only used by the wealthy. But more inexpensive candles were developed and became more widely used. A few people today continue the tradition, although it is discouraged by fire departments.

In 1870, Congress declared Christmas a national holiday and traditions such as the Christmas tree, Santa Claus and gift-giving made their way into the American mainstream, helping to turn December 25 into the family-friendly holiday we know and love today.

On December 22, 1882, Edward H. Johnson, an associate of Thomas Edison and Vice President of the Edison Electric Light Company, had hand-wired Christmas tree light bulbs designed for his personal use. The incandescent light bulbs were about the size of walnuts in red, white and blue colors. He put them on his Christmas tree at his home on Fifth Avenue in New York City. By 1900, businesses started stringing lights behind their windows and adding festive displays. Christmas lights at that time were too expensive for the average person and did not replace candles until 1930.

Santa Claus originally began hundreds of years ago by a monk from Turkey who became the subject of many legends and became known as Saint Nicholas or Kris Kringle. Dutch settlers brought their stories about Sinterklaas, the Dutch pronunciation of St. Nicholas to the Hudson River valley and in 1809, Washington Irving wrote a satire, "History of New York," where he portrayed St. Nicholas as a portly man who flew the skies in a wagon dropping gifts down chimneys. In 1823, Clement Clarke Moore wrote a

poem for his children, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which traded the wagon for a sleigh driven by reindeer.

During the Civil War, cartoonist Thomas Nast began publishing his depictions of rotund and jolly St. Nicholas, whose name was being changed from the Dutch Sinterklaas to Santa Claus, and he was the first to suggest that Santa Claus lived at the North Pole.

Christmas Carols began as Christmas hymns, and one of the first can be traced to 4th-century Rome; "Veni redemptor gentium," (Come, Redeemer of the nations) written by the Archbishop of Milan.

Many popular carols of today, were printed in "Piae Cantiones," a collection of medieval songs published in 1582. "Christ was born on Christmas Day," "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," and "Good King Wenceslas." "O Come All Ye Faithful," ("Adeste Fideles") is thought to have originated in the 13th century. Music books published in 1833 included "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "The First Noel," "I Saw Three Ships," and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing".

Ute Tribes were the first inhabitants of what is now Park County and then came the mountain men like Jim Beckworth and Jim Bridger and explorers like Zebulon Pike and Kit Carson. Due to their nomadic and somewhat isolated life styles, they probably didn't participate in any Christmas rituals. However, when gold was discovered in 1859, the miners more than likely brought Christmas traditions with them. Assuredly, the settlers did.

So, what was Christmas like in South Park in the 1800s? Park County itself came into being in 1861 and being so far away from the more "civilized" life in the east or bigger cities like Denver, one would imagine that any Christmas celebrations in this area were probably humble with mostly homemade gifts.

Upon viewing old newspaper articles from The Flume, starting in 1879 when the paper was first established, it was discovered that Christmas in towns like Fairplay and Alma were entertained with parties, town Christmas trees, and even visits from Santa himself.

One article, December 17, 1897, featured a recap of Christmas 40 years before and it spoke of visiting Grandpa and how they gathered around as the turkey cooked over the fire. The turkey, which seems to be the dish of choice is accredited to Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," written in 1843. However, there was mention of venison and Elk served at some of the parties. Churches held services and there were even special Christmas Programs to attend, and some were quite expensive at \$2 per ticket, but there was food served as well.

One story from Voices from Park Counties Past was from Merrill Wright, who reflected on his early years of living along Jefferson Creek and the Tarryall. Mr. Wright died at age 84 in 2007. "I remember people here were good. I never went hungry, but I used to go to the store and eye the oranges and apples and all that. We never had any but only on Christmas, you know. We'd have an orange and an apple and a popcorn ball and a little ribbon candy and old-fashioned chocolates and one toy ... and that toy had to last us for a year."

Some, who lived away from the towns probably had more meager celebrations, but from what was read, Christmas in the Park was embraced and celebrated much like those in the east or even in Denver.



This photo was taken in 1881 at the Union Chapel in Alma.

(Photo from The Flume archives)



This illustration of a turkey being cooked over an open fire was published in The Flume Dec. 17, 1897.

(Photo from The Flume archives)



This photo of a Christmas tree taken in the Whale Mines boarding house and published in The Flume in the early 1900s.