



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 10, No. 10 Buffalo County Historical Society November-December 1987

## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

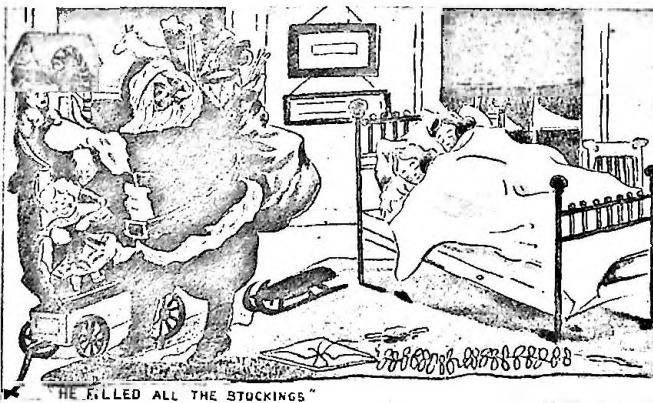
by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

What was Christmas like in the early years of Buffalo County? Here and throughout the nation, despite the commercialism, Christmas is first of all a religious celebration. It is also a family festivity, reflecting the ethnic origins of the family as Christmas traditions are passed on from one generation to another. Other holidays, such as Thanksgiving and the 4th of July, are American in origin, but Christmas festivities reach back into long held customs of families from countries all over the world.

December 25 was the date chosen in 350 A.D. to establish the birthday of Christ, and most of the Christian world soon adopted that date. England first observed it as a holiday in 531, but down through history it has undergone political attack. In this country the Pilgrims of Massachusetts in 1659 passed a law stating:

Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas and the like, either by forebearing labor, feasting or any other way, shall pay for any such offense five shillings as a fine to the country.

That law remained on the books for 22 years, and it was another five years before a Christmas service was conducted in Boston's Town Hall. Even then pagan traditions, such as holly and other decorative greens, were strictly forbidden. Christmas in Massachusetts was a religious ceremony only, not a festive holiday. It was not until



Old fashioned Christmas Greeting Card

1856 that Christmas was made a legal holiday in Massachusetts.

St. Nicholas was an actual person who was canonized in the 16th century. The subject of many legends, one tells why we hang our Christmas stockings by the fireplace. A parishioner had three daughters, but no dowries for any of them, which

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**BUFFALO TALES** is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership . . . . . \$10.00
  - Institutional Membership . . . . . \$15.00
  - Supporting Membership . . . . . \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

**WITH THE SOCIETY**

**Sunday, November 22, 2:00 p.m.** Buffalo County Historical Society meeting at Gibbon. Meet at the Senior Center on Front Street for a tour of the Gibbon Heritage Center.

. . . . .

**December 5-13, 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.** Christmas Open House at Trails and Rails Museum. Museum shopping along with old time toy displays and decorations. If you have a toy or holiday decorations from past years that you can loan, please bring it to the museum before December 2.

. . . . .

**A Message from your President:**

So many people have done so many things at the Museum and for the Society this year that it is impossible to thank each one individually, so let me take this opportunity to say Thank You to all. Because of our limited finances, we must depend on volunteers and your response is deeply appreciated. I especially want to thank the genealogists who have been working on Buffalo County archives. Historians and genealogists can both profit from this.

As you prepare for Christmas, think of your Society in your annual donations and gifts. All donations to Buffalo County Historical Society are tax deductible.

1988 dues are payable January 1. Consider upgrading to Supporting Memberships. My thanks to all who have become Supporting or Life members. This additional support helps us.

Come to the Trails & Rails Museum during Christmas Open House for looking or for shopping. Gift memberships or books from our gift shop are excellent ideas.

Since this is the November/December issue, I wish all of you a Happy Thanksgiving and a Blessed Christmas.

—Margaret Hohnholt

**NEW MEMBERS**

*Life Membership*

Evelyn Cullen, Kearney

*Annual Memberships*

- Erma Klein . . . . . Kearney
- Margaret H. Daggett . . . . . Scottsbluff
- Jim and Kay Smith . . . . . Kearney

meant they would have to be sold into slavery. St. Nicholas, learning of his plight and wishing to keep his generosity a secret, threw a bag of gold coins through an open window one night, which made possible the first daughter's marriage. He later did the same for the second daughter. His third bag of gold accidentally landed in a stocking that the third daughter had hung to dry by the fireplace, and from this legend comes the hanging of Christmas stockings, a tradition still in practice.

"*Silent Night*" was first sung on Christmas Eve in 1818 in a tiny church in Oberneorf, Austria. Father Josef Mohr wrote the lyrics and Franz Gruber the music. This carol has had long and glorious use by generations around the world, and is today a most beloved Christmas song.

"*A Christmas Carol*," written by Charles Dickens in 1843 is recognized as one of the great Christmas stories of modern literature, and probably brought about the revival of the early customs of Christmas carol singing, feasting and gift-giving that had faded in popularity in England.

One of the first Christmas cards is said to have been designed in England in 1846 for Sir Henry Cole, who found affairs of the court too pressing to allow him to handwrite notes of holiday greeting to family and friends.

Santa Claus is an American contribution to the Christmas season. In 1809 Washington Irving was the first to write of Santa and his sleigh drawn by reindeer. The long white beard and robe of red, trimmed in ermine, was the work of Thomas Nast in a cartoon which appeared in *Harpers Illustrated Weekly* in 1863.

By the time the first settlers came to Buffalo County, Christmas was well established as a religious holiday, as well as a festivity for family and friends. Decorating with evergreen, holly and candles and the exchanging of greeting cards were all a part of the Christmas tradition in the 1870's as they are today. Early pioneers may not have had a Christmas tree in the home. If so, it would have been a small one, cut and dragged from the river, and decorated with homemade paper chains, ornaments made of yarn, and popcorn and cranberries strung in garlands.

Churches had ceiling-high evergreen trees, decorated in much the same way, with glass balls and individual clip-on candles. When lit, the trees had to be closely watched because of fire hazard during the Christmas Eve services. Quite often buckets of water were placed near the tree in the event that a wavering candle flame would suddenly ignite the dry needles.

The Christmas Program, whether a pageant or a program of songs and recitations, was the highlight of the Sunday School year for children of Protestant churches. Following the program the minister and members of the church board distributed goodies to the youngsters—sacks of hard candy and nuts, sometimes an apple, but always a fresh golden orange. Fresh oranges were a luxury in the early days of the county, but were always an item in the sacks of Christmas goodies.

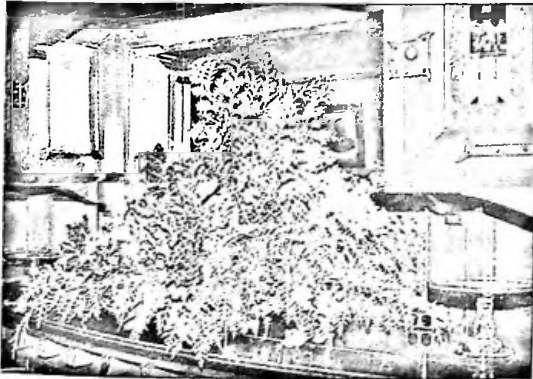
Although the Christmas tree originated in Germany, that custom has by now been adopted by most ethnic groups, but it was not until after the availability of strings of electric lights and the safety factor dispelled that the Christmas tree became a universal symbol of the season. Phyllis Roberts, retired KSC professor, recalls that as a young girl her mother would decorate the dining room chairs and table, set out the best china, and place the cookies, fruit and small gifts on each plate and the larger gifts on the chairs. Also in evidence that Christmas morning was a plate of half-eaten cookies and the remains of a cup of hot chocolate, together with a large footprint on

the porch. that Santa had indeed made a call.

Along with the decorating and the plans for religious celebrations was the Yuletide baking and feasting. As soon as Thanksgiving was over women began their Christmas baking, much of it reflecting ethnic traditions of the family. Mrs. Edith Abraham is a Czech from Ravenna. She describes a traditional Christmas bread, vanocka, sometimes called houska, a slightly sweet dough with raisins, almond and citron, braided into a long loaf and sprinkled with poppy seeds. If vanocka was not ready for Christmas Eve, the following year's harvest would be a poor one. The Christmas Eve Czech meal featured fish, and the Christmas Day menu was roast duck or goose, sauerkraut and potato dumplings, with miscellaneous side dishes, topped off with candy, cookies, fruits, and always, kolaces.

The Lebanese Christmas is a beautiful religious holiday, according to Mitzi Steinbrink, beginning with the Christmas service at midnight, then festivities afterwards when friends go from house to house expressing best wishes, eating sweets and fruits, singing and dancing. Ornate nativity sets are a part of their holiday decoration. Some families plant seeds six days before Christmas and wait for their growth by Christmas morning, symbolizing new life. Festivities of gift exchanges are very limited. Their New Year's Eve celebration begins with church services, followed by the eating of a fried sweet dough the size of a doughnut hole, served hot and dipped in honey or a sweet syrup.

Jane Munro Smith recalls the holiday festivities of her growing-up years as the daughter of George and Alta Munro. Every year with their close friends, Monte and Miriam Worlock, the Munros read aloud Dickens *Christmas Carol* each night for about



Christmas Walk at the Frank House, a tradition since 1977

a week before Christmas, and as the families grew, the children also took part. The singing of carols always preceded the reading. Some holiday traditions in the home were from the *Christmas Carol* story, such as the flaming plum pudding for Christmas dinner, still served in the homes of Jane and her husband, Lee, and her brother Bob and wife, Pat. The family cut their own tree—it had to be tall enough to touch the ceiling; children's stockings were hung on the mantel, and each Christmas Eve a bayberry candle was lit in the window and left burning until the flame died out—this to bring health, wealth and happiness during the year, a tradition carried on today in the homes of Jane and Bob.

Christmas of Greek families also begin with a midnight service followed by visits to relatives and friends extending greetings and eating sweets. One special sweet bread

with coins placed in the loaf is baked for New Year's. The recipient of a piece with a coin will have good luck follow him all year. Other Greek pastries and sweets at holiday time are diples, sugar-coated kourabiedes, baklava and kourlourakia. Their holiday meal features lamb as the main dish.

Kitchens of women of British ancestry were busy with preparation of plum pudding or suet pudding and fruit cakes. Margaret Holzrichter is of Welsh ancestry and recalls that caroling and church services were the highlights of Christmas, and that there were few presents and no tree at her Welsh grandparent's home. The Christmas dinner was goose. Plum pudding and tea cakes filled with currants, as well as Welsh breads were on the menu. A particular sweet that her father enjoyed was a pancake of rich cookie-like dough filled with raisins and baked on a griddle.

The Christmas baking in German households started weeks ahead—fluffy almond cookies, anicebrechen, macaroons, lebkuchen, meringues, and special cakes and holiday breads, and for Christmas dinner, always a fat goose with chestnut dressing.

Through the years the Kearney Woman's Club has observed the holiday season with Christmas festivities, but it was not always so. A news item in December of 1902 deplored the fact that "Christmas shopping and gift-making" had kept down the attendance at the meeting of the Nineteenth Century Club (predecessor to the Woman's Club). The first mention of Christmas by the club was the December 3, 1913 meeting, which was "in the nature of a Christmas Kensington and the program was on the Christmas theme."

The club's Red Cross committee assumed responsibility each year for the city's Christmas seal project. The 1913 Red Cross seal was described: "bearing on its face a vignette of Santa Claus in his sleigh, drawn by eight reindeer." When the current TB Christmas seals replaced the Red Cross seals, the Woman's Club continued the distribution, sending out over 1,000 letters with 100 seals each to residents of Kearney until the project was taken over by the state office.

The Presbyterian Women of Kearney have served a Christmas Tea to members and friends since 1944. The first years of this event featured organ/piano Christmas music by Margaret Wright and the late Opal Tye. Mary Martha Guild of the Zion Lutheran Church have held a Christmas program and tasting tea since 1958, offering a new recipe book each year of the food served. Most churches have similar traditions.

Other holiday traditional events are observed in every community by schools, clubs and organizations, such as the annual Elks Christmas party for children, the Salvation Army food baskets, and the work of the Good Fellows. Yuletide street lighting and festive decoration of homes and business places is traditional in all communities. For many years a massive evergreen tree was brought from the river, decorated and lighted and set in a busy downtown intersection of Elm Creek to bring Christmas cheer to all who passed by. These customs have spread not only throughout Buffalo County, but all over the world, sending forth the Christmas message of love, hope and good cheer.

#### SOURCES

Interviews with Edith Abraham, Helen Paul, Mitzl Steinbrink, Phyllis Roberts, Barbara Saum, Jane Munro Smith, and Margaret Holzrichter; *Liberty*, Nov./Dec. 1977; *American Legion Magazine*, Dec. 1977; *Historical News*, Dec. 1979; *Sunday World-Herald*, Nov. 1, 1987; Kearney Woman's Club scrapbooks.

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### 1988 Memberships

Send a gift membership:

Basic Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$ 10.00
Business Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$ 15.00
Supporting Membership . . . . . annual dues . . . . .	\$ 25.00 +
Life Membership (one time payment):	
Individual . . . . .	\$100.00
Husband and Wife . . . . .	\$150.00

All memberships entitle the member to a subscription to *Buffalo Tales*, participation in meetings, tours, and other events sponsored by the Society.

### Books

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. III, published in 1987. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales* during 1984-1986.

156 pages, 78 photographs, 30 stories, indexed.  
 Paperback, \$7.50 plus 75¢ postage if mailed.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. II, published in 1984. Reprints of stories originally published in *Buffalo Tales* during 1981-1983.

149 pages, 94 illustrations, 30 stories, indexed.  
 Paperback, \$5.95 plus 75¢ postage if mailed.

**Tales of Buffalo County**, Vol. I, published in 1981, is out of print.

The above books also available at *Gerbers Books & Gifts* in downtown Kearney Centre, and at *read all about it* at Hilltop Mall.

<b>Kearney Centennial Booklet</b> , 1873-1973, 106 pages, illustrated	\$ 2.50
<b>Trail Dust to Star Dust</b> , Gibbon centennial, 1871-1971, by Mabel Vohland, 132 pages, illustrated	\$ 8.00
<b>The Untold Story of Boot Hill</b> , (Lowell in the 1870's) by Mrs. George H. Myers, 70 pages, illustrated	\$ 5.00
<b>Kearney State College, 1905, 1980</b> , by Philip S. Holmgren, 224 pages, illustrated	\$ 7.00

### Notepaper

Sketches by Barb Avery and by Carol Kimball	\$ 4.00
Train Whistle	\$ 6.50
Union Pacific glassware, etched with Union Pacific emblem, Kearney centennial medallions, prints, bookends, postcards	

Available at Trails & Rails Museum, 710 West 11th Street, Kearney, or order from Buffalo County Historical Society, Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848, Tel. (308) 234-3041.