



Belsnickels & belly-guts: Holiday traditions of York past

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Christmas became a major American holiday in the 19th century, officially designated as a federal holiday in 1870. English novelist Charles Dickens is frequently credited with helping to make Christmas an important secular holiday, though other writers like Washington Irving and Clement Moore also helped bring the celebration to the forefront of American consciousness.

Many aspects of Christmas in America, however, can be traced to the German settlements. The Pennsylvania Germans in general, and Moravians in particular, were big celebrators of the holiday. While the custom of decorating an evergreen tree at Christmas didn't really catch on nationally until 1850, after "Godey's Lady's Book" published a drawing of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert decorating a tree at Windsor Castle, Yorkers were already displaying decorated trees. In fact, one of the earliest depictions of a Christmas Tree in the United States was by local folk artist Lewis Miller, who drew a decorated tree, labeled "Christmas Tree" and dated 1809. However, Miller probably completed the drawing at a later date.

There is an 1823 account of a Krischtkintle Baum (Kris Kringle Tree) in the York Gazette,

and an 1830 article in the York Republican told of a public display of a Christmas Tree by the Dorcas Society. In the 1949 book "Christmas in Pennsylvania," Franklin and Marshall College professor Dr. Alfred Shoemaker wrote that this was the first public display of a Christmas tree in America. By 1842, local entrepreneurs were capitalizing on the growing popularity of the holiday tradition. Freed slave William C. Goodridge ran an advertisement in the Dec. 21, 1840 York Gazette to sell tickets for the exhibition of a Christmas tree in his home on East Philadelphia Street.

So exactly how did local residents decorate trees in the 19th century? An 1868 advertisement in the York Democrat describes one approach in detail: crimson balls, cakes shaped like birds, wax dolls and toys, lemons and oranges. One of the most popular ornaments during this era was a type of cookie known as matzabaum, which was made from flour, sugar, egg, spices and powdered nuts. For tree ornaments, starch was also used. Matzabaum molds were shaped like animals and flowers.

In the kitchen, metzel soup was a popular holiday tradition, primarily because it was also the time of year when pigs were slaughtered. The soup was made with sausage, spare ribs or pudding (blood sausage). A Christmas turkey with chestnut dressing was a holiday custom in 19th century central Pennsylvania, as was a dessert of Christmas pie, or what we today know as mince pie.

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Christmas cookies were also a holiday tradition. The sand tarts that many of us prepare today are not that different than sand tarts from more than 100 years ago. The key ingredient is a glazing of raw egg with sugar or nuts sprinkled over top. Apees were another popular cookie. An apee was made with flour, butter and white sugar, then flavored with nutmeg, cinnamon and caraway seed. It was also not uncommon to add wine to the batter. Ginger cakes shaped like animals were popular, as was something known as "leb-cake" -- essentially a ginger cake without the ginger, frequently made with honey.

Moshey and belly-guts were also holiday treats. Moshey was both a term used to describe unpulled taffy as well as "clear toys" -- candy made by boiling sugar in syrup. A 1907 York Dispatch article about the William C. Goodridge toy shop at Christmas specifically mentions "clear toys" shaped like animals. Belly-guts were a type of pulled taffy made from boiled flour and molasses, then cut into thin strips. A local account from the late 19th century mentions that boys and girls used to stroll the streets of York selling belly-guts.

While today we associate trick-or-treating and ghost stories with Halloween, if you lived in York in the Victorian era you would associate these activities with Christmas Eve. Belsnickel showed himself on Christmas Eve, visiting homes with children. Belsnickel, a version of the German Peltz Nickel (translated as Nicholas in furs, for St. Nicholas), might give nuts or candy to the good kids, but would whip the bad ones with a birch

stick or rod. There are numerous accounts of Belsnickling in local 19th century newspapers. Belsnickling was a tradition in which a group of youths would disguise themselves using "false faces" (masks) or blackface, then go house to house. They might sing or dance, and then expect candy or cookies in return.

Throughout England and the United States, it was a tradition to tell ghost stories on Christmas Eve. Almost everyone knows of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," but Dickens actually wrote many Christmas ghost stories. Furthermore, he published several magazines throughout his life, and usually focused the Christmas issue on ghost stories. In some households it became a game. The family would gather on Christmas Eve, and everyone would be armed with a bundle of sticks tied together. When it was their turn, they would throw the bundle in the fire, and then had to tell a ghost story while it burned, making the story last as long as it took the sticks to burn.

Second Christmas was also a popular local holiday tradition. The Pennsylvania German culture liked to celebrate "second" holidays -- another day of celebration after the official holiday. Dec. 26 was Second Christmas. In central Pennsylvania, the holiday typically involved fun and games. Young males who lived in the rural parts of the county would travel into town. Innkeepers would host long dances, so the young men could meet the young ladies. They might also pose to have their photograph taken, and partake in a game of chance involving pennies and known as "raffling," or participate in the ever-popular wheelbarrow races, which entailed

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being blindfolded and then pushing a wheelbarrow to a designated target.

Two final holiday traditions from the 19th century are worth noting. One has disappeared with time, the other is alive and well. "Barring out the schoolmaster" was a local custom that typically took place on the day of Christmas Eve or even a day earlier. Students would arrive at the schoolhouse -- usually a one-room schoolhouse -- early in the morning, and lock out the schoolmaster. The schoolmaster would only be allowed to enter after first promising a gift of cookies or candy to each student, and declaring that the remainder of the day would be a holiday.

The second tradition is from southern York County, and dates from 1848: the Glen Rock Carolers. Every Christmas Eve since 1848 a group of carolers, sometimes accompanied by brass or woodwinds or even a glockenspiel, have walked the streets of Glen Rock, singing Christmas carols until the early morning hours of Christmas Day.

While holiday customs have changed over the years, Christmas has been an important part of the York community for many generations. We still decorate trees and make Christmas cookies. And while our ghost stories are typically limited to the one involving the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, we continue to share many traditions with our Victorian predecessors. It's nice to know that in this dynamic, ever-changing world, sometimes things really do stay the same.

TO LEARN MORE: If you would like to learn more, check out the Library and Archives of the York County Heritage Trust or pick up a copy of Dr. Albert L. Shoemaker's wonderful book, "Christmas in Pennsylvania."

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