

Christmas in Amboy, cont.

munity Christmas tree, and sounds of Christmas music. Inside the stores, businesses become alternating hosts in serving holiday refreshments to shoppers.

As Kelly Reuter in her centennial book aptly put it, "Christmas has always been a very special time in our town of Amboy."

Inella Burns

Sources

Amboy Herald, December 23, 1892; December 30, 1892; December 14, 1894; December 28, 1894; December 18, 1925; December 6, 1929; December 24, 1937; December 29, 1939; December 27, 1940; *Country Times*, Amboy, November 19, 1985; Kelly Dethloff Reuter, *Amboy, Minnesota - A Heritage Rooted in Rural America*, 1979; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Political and Social Growth of the American People, 1865-1940*, 1947;

Special thanks to *Country Times* for the use of their files, and to Kelly Reuter and Leona Wiecks for research assistance and photographs.

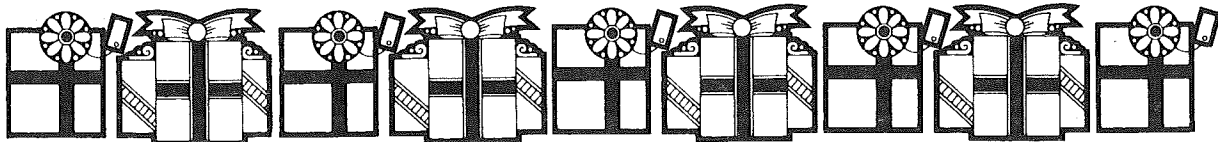
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Museum Shop

Do not forget that the Museum Shop has items which are perfect for gift giving:

- Mankato Trivia Game
- Books for all ages
- Sandon Collector Series Plates
(the new plate, **Old Main**, is very popular)
- Notecards

We still have plenty of the postcards for sending Seasons Greetings. The cards, by Peter Hornby, are of Hubbard House or of Geese on water; they sell in packs of 10 or 25.



Thanks

Thanks to **Marion Swenson** for her gift of a **Norfolk Island Pine** which has found a new home in the kitchen.

Thanks to **Marcia Schuster** for her gift of a **30 cup coffee maker**. It will come in handy for events at the Museum.

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Festival of Lights

The **Festival of Lights** continues on to the end of December. Make a point of driving by the Historical Society and the YWCA in the evening to see a "bright spot" in downtown Mankato.

The Historical Society would like to express thanks to those who made the acquisition of lights possible (donations through the Convention and Visitors Bureau) plus those who labored to hang them on our trees and buildings. Thanks also to the Convention and Visitors Bureau for involving the BECHS in the Festival. Special thanks to: NSP for donation for our lights; City of Mankato Park Department Crew (on ladders and boom truck) for hanging the lights.

* * * *

Coming Soon . . .

Young Historians Program — a series of activities and workshops specially for children grades 3-6. Kris Higginbotham has been contracted to coordinate the programs which will be scheduled from December - June. The topics will vary each month. More information will be available soon. The sessions will be held at the Historical Society — or "on Location" — and will have a limited number for attendance. The programs are funded through the General Operating Support Grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

Blue Earth County
Historical Society
606 South Broad
Mankato, MN 56001

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BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

December 1986

Calendar of Events

- Nov. 27 & 28 Thanksgiving Holiday
Museum and Offices Closed
- Dec. 7 Open House
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.
- Dec. ? (Sat.) Young Historians Program
- Dec. 25 Christmas Holiday
Museum and Offices Closed

Open House

The Blue Earth County Historical Society will host an open house from 7-9 p.m. on Sunday, December 7. There should be a festive mood in the air! This is a chance to visit the museum during the evening hours; hours not normally open to the public. The exhibits seem to take on a different look at night. Refreshments will be served under the guidance of Hal Natvig.

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Editorial Staff: Inella Burns, Audrey
Hicks, Denise Hudson, Gail Palmer,
Louisa Smith, Marcia T. Schuster

Christmas in Amboy

Amboy ushers in the holiday season with a "Christmas Wonderland," an annual event which has grown to be a five-day "extravaganza" that attracts as many as 5,000 people. Held in the American Legion Hall during Thanksgiving weekend, the festival features a variety of theme scenes, including a living Nativity. Santa Claus is on hand, and free sleigh rides are available for visitors.

But large scale community celebrations are not confined to the present decade in Amboy. From its early years, the town has exhibited a community festive spirit at Christmas time.

In 1892, a year of rather hard times, the *Amboy Herald* for December 23 carried a four-page "Holiday Supplement" with poems, stories, games, recipes, and legends, many of which were written for children. According to a local news item in that issue, Amboy churches were planning a big community celebration to be held in the Opera House on Christmas Eve. The program was to consist of recitations, readings, speeches, and music. "A cottage and two trees loaded down with presents were to be the principal feature of the evening." The following week's account of the event reported the festivities as "largely attended by a happy throng who came from far and near. The trees and cottage were loaded with innumerable costly and elegant presents and no one was slighted. It was a very happy occasion . . . long to be remembered."

Two years later the nation's depression had deepened. Banks were toppling, a number of railroads were going into receivership, unemployment was acute, and the farmers were suffering further adversity with wheat selling for 49¢ a bushel. But in Amboy, plans were going enthusiastically ahead for the town's community Christmas entertainment at the Opera House. The Methodist Church had taken it in hand and had set up committees. Mr. Cooper, H. Cross, and S.W. Miller were in charge of arrangements and finance; the Sunday School teachers were responsible for the program; and Zella Holden, Aggie Cross, Erma Brush, Horace Robinson, Mark Perrin, and John Bakke were in charge of decorations. The December 28th *Amboy Herald* proclaimed this union Christmas Eve entertainment "unquestionably one of the most enjoyable Christmas events ever attempted in Amboy or Blue Earth County." In keeping with the occasion, the program consisted of music by the choir, prayers and remarks by minis-

ters, and recitations by Sunday School "scholars." Santa Claus made his appearance and every child and many older people in the large assembly of more than 500 people were favored with valuable and handsome gifts from the "beautiful and heavy laden tree." The Ladies Aid Society presented a special gift, a beautiful black dress, to Mrs. G.H. Wareham, wife of the Methodist minister, and the Willow Creek Society gave her a handsome quilt.



Florence (Dauer) Kresal on tree-bedecked soda fountain counter in the John Dauer Restaurant at Christmas time, ca. 1908.

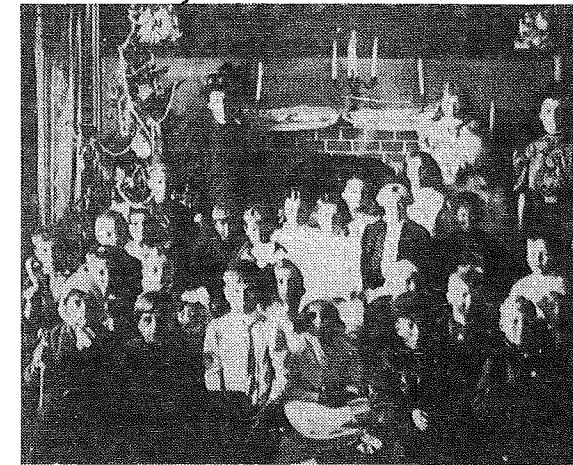
That Amboy was transcending the harsh economic times was reflected also in their volume of business during the 1894 holiday season. The *Amboy Herald* on December 28 reported, "Last Saturday was a hummer for trade, notwithstanding the rough condition of the roads. The stores were thronged with customers from early morn til late at night, making Christmas purchases."

In addition to the community Christmas Eve celebrations, Amboy has a tradition of decorating houses. As early as the World War I years, the Commercial Club sponsored contests for the best yard or residence decoration. At that time many houses had lighted candles and wreaths in the windows or Christmas trees lighted on porches and in yards.

A decade later, the *Amboy Herald* reported, "People from outside have declared Amboy to be the prettiest Christmas town they've seen. In addition to street decorations and Christmas trees in front of each business place, several residences have decorated houses and yards. Among those who have outside decorations are William DeWitz, Fred Apitz, A.R. Gerton, F.W. Boesch, and H.E. Salsbery." The Commercial Club offered a prize of \$5.00 to the winner.

In all the Amboy celebrations down through the years, Santa Claus has figured prominently, although in 1925 children weren't too sure he would arrive. That year the elementary school presented an operetta in which Santa was struck down by Madame Flu, and Christmas seemed threatened. But in the nick of time the Fairy Queen took over his gift-distributing preparations, and in the end, Santa came out smiling and fully recovered.

In Amboy's centennial book, *Amboy Minnesota-A Heritage Rooted in Rural America*, author Kelly Dethloff Reuter tells of other Santa arrivals. He has come by sleigh, fire truck, Piper Cub airplane, snowmobile, and "once, because his elf chauffeur was late, he arrived by pickup truck." The afternoon before Christmas in 1937, Santa Claus and his helpers visited every house in Amboy where there were children and left a gift for every child. The gift sacks bearing the greeting, "Merry Christmas to the Kiddies," were provided by the Commercial Club who even made arrangements for rural children to receive them too.



Amboy schoolroom decorated for Christmas.

Perhaps the greatest of the earlier community Christmas celebrations Amboy staged was in 1939, when the country had about recovered from the Great Depression and had not yet become involved in the war in Europe. The *Amboy Herald* on December 29, carried an account of the celebrations:

The Christmas spirit and Christmas festivities prevailed in a large measure in Amboy on the last few days preceding this great holiday, with our businessmen, Commercial Club, all churches and private citizens taking part in the many activities. The streets and residences were decorated by trees, wreaths and lights which all added to the bright and cheery holiday appearance which pervaded the entire town.

Last Friday afternoon, December 22, Jay Gould's St. Nickolas Holiday Festival program filled the bill. A clown policeman appeared on the street, as also did Santa Claus and his sleigh drawn by Mule-deer. The mule was fitted out with deer antlers and if anyone wonders how and why he responded so promptly to Santa's wishes — you can be told in a whisper that it was because of a hotshot dry battery and a jump spark that was connected to the critter's harness. When action was desired, a little pressure on an electrical button did the trick to the satisfaction of Santa and everyone else with the exception of the mule. Free acts and a program were given on a special stage erected at the bank corner at 2 o'clock which attracted a large crowd of eager youngsters. The program consisted of clowns, a second story man, and the North Pole Troupe of trained dogs. Also hundreds of sacks of nuts and candy were given away, which helped to make the most successful and enjoyable Christmas party ever held here. During the remainder of the afternoon Gould's well-equipped sound truck toured the streets playing Christmas and popular melodies in all quarters of the town. In the evening, a number of local singers were taken into this truck and they sang old favorite Christmas songs and melodies to shut-ins all over the village 'til 9 o'clock. Saturday afternoon and evening the businessmen had attractions of their own which also drew another large crowd. Some of our businessmen report that their business broke all records for the last two days before Christmas. Local churches also took part with special entertainment, mostly children's programs, all of which were very largely attended. There were services in all the churches of the village, including a candlelight service at dawn in the Methodist Church. The 1939 Christmas tide in Amboy and vicinity will long be remembered as one of the best in its entire history and for which we know, all are duly thankful and appreciative, especially when compared to the state of war that exists in many foreign countries at this particular yuletide.

The amplified caroling of that 1939 celebration was continued in 1940 by Corbett Radio Sales, who installed sound equipment in the belfry of the Presbyterian Church. Christmas music from the church could be heard as far as five miles away.

A visitor in Amboy during the holidays this year will find many Christmas traditions from the past are still kept. With the opening of "Christmas Wonderland," Main Street becomes festive with Christmas lights, decorated store fronts, a com-