

Christmas Customs of Lancaster County

By ELIZABETH CLARKE KIEFFER

"Ah, sweet Christmas-tide of childhood,
Warm and living in my heart!
Leaping pulses greet thy memory,
Tears upon my eyelids smart.
Dark the clouds, the years concealing,
Since I knew thee, as a boy;
But thou gleamest, bright as ever,
Fairest light of childhood's joy."¹

The above lines are a free translation of a Pennsylvania-German poem, which was probably written in Lancaster in the early 1850's, since it was published in "The Guardian," while its author, Dr. Henry Harbaugh, was pastor of the First Reformed Church of this city.

The Christmas which Dr. Harbaugh recalls so lovingly in "Das Krisch-kindel" and others of his poems and stories,² is not, it is true, a Lancaster County one. The author's childhood, which forms the subject of so many poems in his "Harfe," was passed in the pleasant Harbaugh Valley among the Blue Ridge mountains of Franklin County. But the essential features of the Pennsylvania-German Christmas, as it was celebrated in the eastern counties of Pennsylvania, and the western ones of Maryland, were much the same. And, whatever the preponderant influence of the English rulers, in politics, government, and the ordinary functions of social life, Christmas in Pennsylvania, and especially in Lancaster County, was, essentially, a German festival.

In the northern colonies, the joyous season was outlawed. The Puritans considered it one of the evil survivals of papistry, and statutes forbidding its celebration remained on the books of some New England communities until well into the nineteenth century. Into the South, the cavaliers imported the customs of Merrie England, and modified them to suit the warm climate and the genial life of the large plantations.

But the Christmas customs of Dutch New York, and of German Pennsylvania and Maryland were direct importations from the lowlands of Holland and of the Saar Valley. Indeed, if one follows a war map of the Siegfried and the Maginot lines, one can find, included between them, much of the territory in which the kindly Christmas customs of Lancaster County originated.

Even among the Germans, the plain sects mostly discouraged Christmas as a worldly frivolity, and a feast not mentioned in the Bible. Today, one sometimes exchanges Christmas cards with a Mennonite or a Dunker friend, and plain parents and grandparents give simple gifts to their, as yet unbap-

¹ Harbaugh's *Harfe*, Philadelphia, 1870, p. 39.

² The *Star of Bethlehem*. A Christmas story for good children, by Rev. H. Harbaugh, Lancaster, 1862.

tised, children. The Amish, curiously enough, celebrate "second Christmas," the old rowdy festival of fun and frolic, games and horseplay, against which Dr. H. M. Muhlenberg once preached a sermon. All these, however, are the outpourings of natural humanity, and not customs sanctioned by the rules of the sect. As a whole, the Christmas festival owes its preservation in the county to the Catholics, the Lutherans, the Reformed, and, most of all, to the Moravians.

This being so, it is not surprising that Christmas, in this community, has always laid its chief stress upon its religious aspect. I have been unable to discover at what date the first midnight mass was celebrated, but it is safe to assume that special masses for Christmas were begun as early as the founding of the Roman church in the community. Michael Schlatter and Henry M. Muhlenberg, organizers, respectively, of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in the state, in the first half of the eighteenth century, both insisted on the celebration of religious services on Christmas day, and, wherever possible, themselves administered the Holy Communion at such a service.³ From the records of the First Reformed Church, it is plain that, in the mid-eighteenth century, it was customary for children to receive their first communion on Christmas Day. In this same church, a hundred years later, Dr. Harbaugh, in further evidence of his love of Christmas, inaugurated the beautiful early morning service, which is still celebrated each Christmas dawn, using the same ritual, and the same music which he selected, and lighted by the blazing gas-lit star, which has been one of the mysterious marvels of Christmas for children of this community for nearly a hundred years.

At one time, I am told, it was customary for the choirs of all the Lancaster churches to unite, and to sing first at the five o'clock mass at St. Mary's Church, and again at the six o'clock service at First Reformed, an example of friendliness and toleration typical of the spirit of the community.

The Moravian Christmas Eve service at Lititz⁴ was begun in 1759, and although later features have been added from time to time, the general outline has remained much the same. The trombone choir (originally French horns); the singing of stately old music, Mozart, Haydn, and the ancient chorales, with the beautiful, "Morning Star," beloved of Moravians everywhere; the "Liebesmahl" (those delicious sugared buns, and coffee); and the trays of lighted candles passed by the "diener" to each one present. The touching beauty of this service, as it is celebrated both in Lititz and in the Moravian church in Lancaster has reached the hearts of many people outside the Moravian brotherhood, and has become one of the dearest features of our local Christmas.

For all these church celebrations, a great deal of preliminary work had to be done, especially in the days before it was possible to buy Christmas

³ Dubbs, J. H. Christmas among the Pennsylvania Germans, Pennsylvania-German magazine, December, 1911, vol. 12, p. 705-7.

⁴ Weitzel, Louise A. How Christmas is observed by the Moravians, Pennsylvania-German Magazine, December, 1908, vol. 9, p. 531-534.

greens at every street-corner. Preparing the decorations for the church usually fell to the lot of the young people, and "greens-tying" in many congregations was a festival as popular as the Christmas service itself. Indeed the older committee-members, whose duty it was to direct activities, were often exasperated to find that more love-making than work was being accomplished, as the long ropes of greenery grew under the skillful fingers.

A more sedate memory is treasured by the Methodists, who recall that, at one time, their churches celebrated an early morning "experience meeting," on Christmas Day.

The Sunday School entertainment was of late development. (The Sunday School itself—in present form—did not begin until 1832.) In the newly discovered diary of Dr. Harbaugh, however, we find it a flourishing festival in the 1850's, including a lighted tree, the singing of carols, and the distribution of cakes. In country districts this feature took hold more slowly, and we hear that, as late as 1870, it was still frowned upon as a dangerous and worldly practice.⁵ Within ten years, however, the practice had become universally accepted. A monthly paper, "The Pastor's Helper," published by the Willow Street charge of the Reformed Church (Heller's, Willow Street, and Conestoga), 1888 to 1897, describes the Christmas entertainments at these Sunday Schools in detail. The first one, held at Willow Street in 1888, may serve as an example. This school closed for the winter at Christmas, and the entertainment combined closing exercises and the Christmas service. There was a tree, Christmas hymns, an address by the pastor, and distribution of prizes; a book was given to each of six children with perfect attendance, and another to Annie Weinhold, who had memorized and recited the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. At the close, there were distributed "the usual Christmas candies in nice little boxes."

At Heller's Church, in 1889, the pupils of one class started something when they gave their teacher a Christmas present. The following year, every class did the same. In this year, the first printed services prepared by the Sunday School Board were used, showing that the formerly deplored entertainment, was now officially recognised.

In the day school, Christmas assumed an entirely different aspect from that of the religious festivals. A curious custom, of which I cannot find the origin, although one writer attempts to associate it with the English "Lord of Misrule," existed locally for many years, reaching its height about 1830-50. It was the custom of "barring out the schoolmaster." Harbaugh mentions this in "Das Schulhaus an der Krick,"⁶ and H. L. Fisher in "Die Alte Zeite";⁷ while the latter in his English revision of the same elaborates

⁵ Schuler, H. A. The old-time Pennsylvania-German Christmas, Pennsylvania-German Magazine, December, 1906, vol. 7, p. 411-419.

⁶ Harfe, p.18.

⁷ H. L. Fisher, 'S alt Marik-haus mittes in d'r Schtadt, York, 1879, p. 192.

the story into a full-length poem,⁸ telling the joys and fears of this Christmas Eve banditry. The practice seems to have varied in different districts. In its mildest form, the children merely stretched a symbolic string across the doorway, and stood guard by it, until the teacher paid his or her way into the building with a tariff of nuts, cookies, or hard candies. In its most violent manifestation, the older pupils locked themselves into the building for several days, having taken provisions with them, or being fed through the window by sympathetic parents, and refused to open the door, until the teacher signed a contract promising holidays, fewer whippings, shorter lessons, or whatever the rebels demanded. Mostly, however, the matter was a mere convention, the door being locked until the teacher, with some affected demur promised a holiday or a treat.⁹

With the coming of the Public School system, the custom died rapidly, as the teachers, no longer dependent on private support, need no longer submit to the tyranny. However, in rural districts, the custom persisted for some time. Phebe Earle Gibbons¹⁰ mentions it in 1882, and a lady still living recalls a Christmas in East Petersburg, when a New England girl, serving her first term as schoolmistress there, and never having heard of the custom, was so shocked at the sudden insurrection, that she broke a window, and climbed in, to quell the rioters.

If one man, more than another, has made a lasting contribution to the joys of Christmas in America, it is Dr. J. P. McCaskey. In the eight volumes of his "Franklin Square Song Collections," which were to American school music what the McGuffey Readers were to school literature, there are to be found practically all the finest Christmas carols in the language. Dr. McCaskey's own boyhood Christmases were rich in happy memories, as he recorded in a letter to Mrs. D. B. Landis, published by this society in 1928,¹¹ and it may have been on this account, that he included so many of this type of song in his collections. Many later collections of Christmas carols, acknowledge their debt to this source, and there are few of us, who did not first learn, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly," "Carol, carol, Christians," "Christmas bells are sounding clear," "Christ was born on Christmas Day," and many others, from his pages. They might all have eventually found their way into our schools and homes from other sources, but it seems certain that they would not have reached us in such bountiful profusion if "Old Jack" had not been so eager a collector of melodies.

To many, of course, the principal joy of the festival was the feast. Even Christopher Marshall, who ordinarily paid no attention to Christmas in his entries for December 25, paused in 1777, to remark as upon an unusual circumstance, that he had only one guest to dinner, and that the menu included "good roast turkey, plain pudding and minced pies."

⁸ *Ibid*, Olden Times, York, 1888, p. 217-224.

⁹ Schuler, *Op. cit.*

¹⁰ Pennsylvania Dutch and Other Essays, Lippincott, 1872, p. 49-53.

¹¹ L. C. H. S., vol. 32, p. 129.

Turkey was always, of course, a usual Christmas bird, but not so indispensable as on Thanksgiving. We read of many Christmas feasts in which a duck, a baked ham, or a roast pig was substituted as the main dish. Fresh sausage often seems to be regarded as the typical Christmas treat, as also stuffed pig's stomach. For side dishes, stewed onions, mashed potatoes, and dried corn seem inevitable. The English plum-pudding does not seem to have found its way into the Lancaster Christmas dinner until the reading of Dickens' "Christmas Carol" became popular.

Christmas cookies, of course, should rightfully have a paper all their own. Of all sizes, shapes, and flavors, their recipes are found in old family cook-books which have passed from mother to daughter for generations, and may have originated in Bohemia, in Switzerland, in Zweibrucken, or Bavaria. Sand-tarts, and ginger-cookies, wafer thin, with fluted edges, lebkuchen, springerle, pepper-nuts, hermits, raisin-cookies, and sugar cookies. Some were iced, some studded with almonds, some sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. All were delicious, and each a blissful memory. Sometimes they were cut into forms of beast, bird, or fish, appropriately iced and used as decorations for the Christmas tree or arranged in procession at a window to rouse the envy of one's playmates.¹²

A Christmas goody with which I was familiar in my childhood in Maryland, under the name of "Mosey," was a soft molasses candy, full of black walnuts. I always supposed it to be of negro origin, like the praline, but find that it was once common locally under the German name of "Mosche."

Dear as these toothsome memories are, there are still sweeter ones to the heart of childhood, and it is in these enchantments that the local Christmas is so unique.

The Christmas tree, and the "Putz" (or Christmas garden) both came to us from Germany, but they reached us from different parts of that country, and were united in Pennsylvania. The tree, originally a religious symbol of the ancient Teutonic tribes, was adapted to Christianity by the Germans of the northern forests. The putz, or krippe, or creche, was common to nearly all the Catholic parts of Europe, but was brought to Pennsylvania by the Moravians from the regions that were recently Czecho-Slovakia. This is why Lititz and Bethlehem are the acknowledged "putz" centers of America.¹³ Its origin was definitely religious, and it was probably first used in the churches. As its name implies, it was originally a miniature representation of the manger scene, artists gradually began to embellish this by the addition of scenery, moss-covered hills, lakes, beasts of the forests, huntsmen, laborers, houses, farms, all the busy scenery of everyday life. Latterly, electric trains, and other machines have been added, until the manger group, once the center and

¹² Recipes for these cookies may be found in: Hark, Hex Marks the Spot, Lippincott, 1938, Appendix; Frederick, The Pennsylvania-Dutch and their Cookery, N. Y., 1935, chapter 14.

¹³ Hark and Weitzel, *op. cit.*

meaning of the whole, has been dwarfed, or excluded altogether. At one time, great mechanical displays of this kind were popular. In 1837, the Lancaster newspapers carried advertisements of two such marvels one at the Landis Museum, and another at Mechanics Hall. Today similar displays can be seen at most of the fire-houses, and the writer knows of one unique Christmas garden made by an ardent geologist, in which appear electrically animated dinosaurs, pleiososaurs, pterodactyls, and other creatures of the Carboniferous era, while a cave-man perpetually chases a sabre-toothed tiger around the Christmas tree.

The tree, itself, whether united with the putz, or separated from it, has also undergone many changes. From the days in Germany, when its boughs bore only cakes, apples and gilded nuts, it passed into the stage of pop-corn, and cranberry chains, augmented with crude home-made ornaments, paper-chains, cornucopias, scrap-picture angels, and tin-foil canoes. Then followed manufactured ornaments in blown glass; grapes, balls, bells with silvery notes, peacocks with tinsel tails. Many of these early treasures can still be found in local homes, some of them over a hundred years old. Candles were early used on the tree, and in Dr. Harbaugh's poem were his dearest recollection of it. In many families, however, they were discontinued because of the danger of fire. It was a great relief to many anxious mothers, when colored electric lights came to take the place of the more dangerous illumination.

Artificial trees, as substitutes for the real ones, were, at first, very poor imitations. They, too, however, have changed with the years, and after passing through a period when they could be had in silver, gold or colors, one may now buy a tree which looks like a real one, shines with colored lights, and plays "Silent Night."

Like the tree and the putz, two other Christmas customs of widely separate origin came together in Pennsylvania. These were Belsnickel and the Krischkindel. Belsnickel was originally "Peltz-Nichol" or, freely translated, "St. Nicholas in the fur coat." He did not, originally, belong to Christmas, at all. His festival was on St. Nicholas Day, December 6, and is still so celebrated in Northern Germany and Holland. He came, on this day, in his fur coat, catechised the children, made them say their prayers, gave the good ones sugar plums, and presented the mother with a switch for the bad ones.

The Krischkindel was, of course, the Christ-Kindlein or Christ-Child. He came on Christmas Eve, lit the candles on the tree, rang a little bell, and scattered goodies for the children. He came, like the putz from the Catholic regions, he and the Belsnickel met in the Palatinate, where at one time, the Belsnickel led the donkey which carried the Christ-Child through the streets.¹⁴ The two came to America, as it were, on the same ship.

For almost a century, they lived together quite peaceably in Pennsylvania, both visiting the same families on Christmas Eve. Belsnickel became more and more a creature of terror, resigning his gift-giving habits, and coming

¹⁴ Gibbons, *op. cit.*, appendix.

only to frighten and punish. Dr. Harbaugh celebrated him too, in a poem¹⁵ in which he makes him a horrid monster, more beast than man.

The Krischkindel, a mild and charming spirit, was usually impersonated by an older child. He came silently, robed in white, and bearing a basket of gifts. A delightful account of this visitant is included in the Christmas recollections of an old Pennsylvania-German woman, published in 1906.¹⁶

Sometimes the Krischkindel did not make a personal appearance, but everyone knew that the soup-plates full of goodies [the stocking was late in reaching the county], which appeared on the dining table on Christmas morning, were left by him in the night. Children who went around to their family and friends on Christmas morning, demanding their gifts as a rightful tax, said: "Give me my Krischkindel!"

In 1822, an event occurred which, although no one knew it, was to end the lives of both Belsnickel and Krischkindel. This was the publication in New York of Clement Clarke Moore's poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." Gradually, but surely, these verses painted in the American mind a picture of the modern Santa Claus. Even in Dr. Harbaugh's childhood, he tells us, he was puzzled as to whether the Krischkindel was a child or a bearded old man with a pipe. Gradually, religious people began to feel that the substitution was for the best. To look to the Christ-Child for dolls and toys was a materialistic view of the Savior of the world. The Belsnickel lingered awhile, but he fell upon evil days. From being enacted by father or uncle, he began to turn up, uninvited, in the person of the village rough, who sometimes was too frightening. Gradually, crowds of small boys began to go out disguised as Belsnickels, much as children now go out on Hallowe'en.¹⁷ As the German died out, it was forgotten that Belsnickel's name demanded furs, but, oddly enough, it was remembered that the furry appearance was produced by turning a coat inside out to show the fur lining. Thus, later Belsnickels always wore their coats inside out, with or without fur. With the coming of a new century the last of these masqueraders disappeared.

In the last forty years, many changes have come to the Christmas season. From a purely religious and domestic feast, it has gradually taken on a community aspect. The giving of gifts to the poor is no longer a haphazard charity of individuals. We have today the organized distribution of Christmas baskets. The Salvation Army, Rescue Mission, and some of the fire houses, the lodges, serve free meals to the poor. College fraternities give children's parties. The Toy Mountain and the Cheer Shop insure the distribution of Santa's gifts to their proper destination. The exchange of gifts in the public schools is so arranged that no one is slighted or hurt.

The decoration of shop-windows and the downtown streets has grown more elaborate each year. Community trees have been erected in several parts

¹⁵ Harfe, p. 23.

¹⁶ Schuler, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Gibbons, *op. cit.* p. 49.

of the city. Community carols have been sung in the square. Groups of carollers go about the streets on Christmas Eve. Newspapers get out special Christmas editions. The decorations on the watch-factory lawn, with all the evergreen trees alight, and the paintings by Florence Taylor Humphreys, have for the last fifteen years drawn tourists from all over the state. For the last two years, the astonishingly beautiful display at the filter plant, where lighted trees and stars are reflected in the still surfaces of the pools, has added an unforgettable delight to our local holiday.

There are many who deplore the introduction of the commercial and secular note into our festivities. I am not so sure that our modern Christmas is not, rather, introducing the religious note into our commercial and secular life. Carols sung to draw people into a department store, at least bring the sacred story to the ears of many who would never hear them, and the Santa Claus who rings his bell to collect money on street corners is serving, perhaps, a holier purpose than the white-robed Krischkindel of our grandfather's day.

Dr. Harbaugh finished his poem with somewhat the same thought:

“Some folks say it's all a fable—
There's no Christ Child. Maybe so!
Birds must pipe as birds are able.
Christian folk know what they know.
I have never seen Krischkindel
In the holy Christmas night;
But I've seen the tree asparkle
And I say: *He caused its light.*”