

Christmas placed third in the 1850s

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY
CORRESPONDENT

How old-fashioned, we exclaim, as the electric candles glow in the village windows or when we receive a particularly quaint Christmas card that catches our fancy.

But it wasn't always so, here in our town. The dipping and moulding of candles was often a chore, and the burning of them was done sparingly.

Even the sending of cards by way of friendly greeting and remembrance is a relatively new custom.

It was the middle of the 19th century when Louis Prang first designed the Christmas card. His earlier ones featured flowers and birds rather than his later traditional holiday motifs which are currently so popular.

Also, the presence of individual trees in one's home was not common practice.

And yet, hearts were aglow, and there was some celebrating during the Christmas season in the villages of Westford. Let's turn back the calendar, poke through diaries and records of the old families of the town to catch a glimpse of Christmas past:

Kate Hamlin, recalling the 1850s: "The two great days of the year were the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day. Christmas was not celebrated to the extent it is now [1930s]. To be sure, we hung up stockings and had a few presents. At school we could choose whether we would have Christmas or New Year's Day for a holiday — we could not have both, so we usually chose Christmas, because that came first."

Emma M. Day, from her diary Dec. 24, 1868: "W.S. and I and Ada went up to the Christmas tree [Congregational Church, new Parish Hall of First Parish Church United of Westford]. W. got two nice handkerchiefs and \$1.50 to get a Testament. Ada had a work basket and bag candy and a horn candy she got a little basket and some sugar animals, peanuts and five cents. Aunt P. gave her and Quincy both. F and Mother both had a Spec Case."

"Dec. 25, 1868: Fair S went up in town when F. and W. went to work and staid till night. I worked on my Bonnet that W. [Warren, her husband] gave me. I was very much pleased with it. It was black velvet."

May E. Day (granddaughter of Emma Day), from her diary, Dec. 25, 1905: "Hung up my stocking last night. Got half a dozen handkerchiefs from Grandma, penwiper from Addie, collar from Mamma. Papa gave me 10 cents, orange, dates, chocolates, peanuts and candy in my stocking. Went to the Christmas tree in town in the evening. Mrs. Osgood gave each in her class a box of writing paper. I have plenty of that already."

Allister MacDougall, turn-of-the-century: "About two or three times a year we took a trip to Low-

ell in the carriage. We'd put the 'hoss' in a stable on Church Street. For children it was quite a treat, especially during the Christmas season with the windows decorated with all the toys. We'd return 9, 10 or 11 o'clock over the road to Westford. I always remember it was when we hit Princeton Boulevard that we'd hear the first clank of hoof of our trotting 'hoss'. 'Til we reached that point in our journey, all the roads were dirt."

Elizabeth Cushing Taylor (teacher at Tadmuck District School No. 1), 1906: "At Christmas time Aaron Tuttle carried me in his pung down to the depot where he chopped two trees which were later decorated with popcorn and cranberries. [One tree was for upstairs; the other was for downstairs]." The children — and she had 35 — brought her numerous gifts.

Lucinda Prescott, turn-of-the-century at Stony Brook School: "The teacher's desk was on the raised platform, but was taken down for the Christmas tree. The teacher took care of 'boughten' things; we had to make the decorations — sometimes strings of cranberries, but usually strings of corn [popcorn] from our place. There was some scrappin' amongst stringing at our place, but if we said we'd do it, Mother made sure we did."

George Perkins, turn-of-the-century at Stony Brook School: "We'd celebrate Christmas with little pieces to say. You thought you were something saying those pieces."

Frank Jarvis, Parkerville School, 1915-1920: "Students always looked forward to skating. At this time February or mid-winter vacations were unheard of. Christmas and April were the only weeks off from school. We worked hard in those days."

Minnie Perkins, turn-of-the-century at Minot's Corner District School: "At Christmas we decorated the tree with paper chains, popcorn and cranberries. The teacher gave a box of candy to everyone; we were tickled to death. I remember one time I brought a pretty hanky to the teacher for a gift. At the Christmas party we all had to recite pieces on the platform."

Still more memories are shared from the Lyon School. The late Mrs. Harry Inez Ingalls came to this school in 1884 right after her fifth birthday. When she was still in her eighties she remembered the piece for school which she had memorized from her grandmother's almanac:



Christmas cards of the 1890s.

*'A Merry Christmas
To crown the closing year,
With peace and goodwill to mortals
And words of holy cheer.
What though the dreary landscape
Be clothed in purest white,
If bright the fire and cheerful
Light up our Christmas night.'*

And many still remember the days when Gordon Seavey played the part of Santa Claus at the Unitarian Church (now First Parish Church United of Westford) and Billy Prescott was the Santa who annually appeared at the belfry door of the Congregational Church. It was at the latter, commonly called the "brown church" as opposed to the "white church" across the street, that Clarence Burne was selected to buy the Christmas tree for the Sunday School back in the 1930s.

When the festivities were over, picture, if you will, Clarence and his children dragging the tree down the middle of Boston Road (there was little traffic in those days), lopping off the top and car-



rying that special Church School evergreen into their home for their own celebration.

It's memories like these that make one a wee bit nostalgic.

— June Kennedy is a Westford resident and a freelance writer. This article is the fourth in a continuing series on Westford history.