

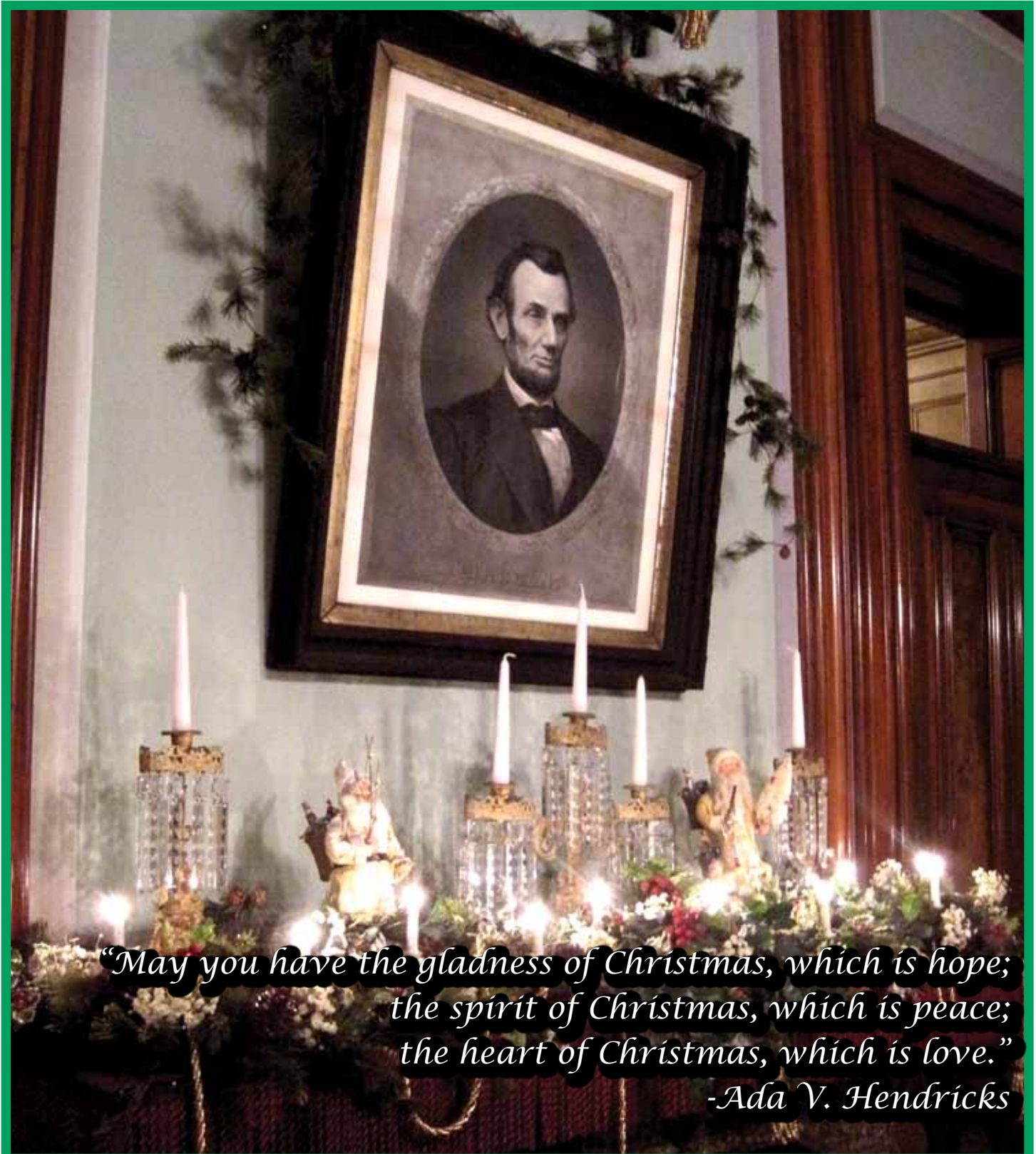


the

COOK-WITTER REPORT

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*"May you have the gladness of Christmas, which is hope;
the spirit of Christmas, which is peace;
the heart of Christmas, which is love."*

-Ada V. Hendricks

Yuletide on the Prairie

Christmas hasn't always been the mega holiday it is today. It has a long and at times troubled past. For a while some Christian religions shunned it for its pagan ties and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, young, masked rabble rousers in Europe and America's Eastern cities turned the holiday into a nightmare by creating havoc and invading homes to demand money.

Christmas celebrations in Illinois have run the gamut, too, from comic or odd to joyous or really, really snowy.

The Christmas of the Deep Snow

In the 1800s central Illinoisans identified themselves by whether or not they had arrived before or after "the Deep Snow" of 1830/31. Those who weathered it considered it a medal of honor and called themselves "snowbirds," according to Helen Van Cleave Blankmeyer's *The Sangamon Country* (Sangamon County Historical Society, 1965). They looked with disdain upon those who hadn't been here to undergo winter's severe test.

The snow began on Christmas Eve, 1830, according to Paul Angle's *Here I Have Lived: A History of Lincoln's Springfield* (Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, 1971). "On Christmas Day it was a foot deep, and everyone was jubilant. Then the weather turned bitter cold, and the snow continued," he writes. Children loved it and played with sleds and sleighs.

"By (December) 30th the snow was three feet deep," writes Blankmeyer. Eventually it rose to four or five feet high. Some people, especially in rural

areas, starved and froze. Their livestock died, they ran low on food, and their firewood ran out. What had started as a beautiful white Christmas had turned dangerous. "Several human beings were lost in the snow and frozen to death," Blankmeyer says.

A Day Off

Six years later, in 1836, first-time state legislator Abraham Lincoln got a break from session when the Illinois House of Representatives took Christmas Day as a holiday, according to the Papers of Abraham Lincoln's web site, the Lincoln Log (www.thelincolnlog.org). At that time the state capital was Vandalia. Representatives returned to work the next day. (The Vandalia Statehouse, which was the capitol between 1836 and 1839, is a state historic site now. It's the oldest Illinois Statehouse still in existence.)

There's no record of what Lincoln did on his day off that year.

Thanks, President Grant

Regardless of how or whether they celebrate December 25th, Americans have a former Illinoisan to thank for getting the day off.

Although Christmas was already being celebrated on December 25th, it was President Ulysses S. Grant, who had lived in Galena and worked in Springfield for a very short time, who made the day a federal holiday. In 1870, he approved legislation making the Fourth of July, New Year's Day, and Christmas Day holidays for federal workers.

Gifts and Sleigh Wrecks

About that same time, Illinoisans were on their way to making Christmas more like the holiday we know today, according to the new book *Christmas in Illinois*, edited by James Ballowe and published by the University of Illinois Press (2010). They had begun decorating trees, decorating their homes and churches, giving gifts, and eating special meals on Christmas Day.

In 1860, the gift-giving had already begun. One Springfield newspaper, the *Illinois State Journal*, enticed readers with local stores' ads for gold and silver watches, "plain, chaste and hair bracelets, coral, lava, mosaic and cameo sets," books, hair-braided jewelry and more. That year the Lincolns might have given their rowdy boys handkerchiefs because a ledger from the Springfield store John Williams & Co. notes that either Mary or Abraham purchased four chil-

ON THE COVER: A steel engraving of Abraham Lincoln rests above the mantel in the dining room of Bloomington's nineteenth-century David Davis Mansion, which is decorated for the holidays. This state historic site was the home of Judge David Davis and his wife, Sarah. Davis was a friend and colleague of Lincoln's. The engraving was a copy of a painting by John H. Littlefield. The engraving was "entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1869 by John H. Littlefield in the District of Columbia clerk's office." Littlefield's painting closely resembles a photograph of Lincoln taken by Anthony Berger on February 9, 1864, for the Matthew Brady Studio. Berger's photograph was considered so good that Robert Todd Lincoln called it "the most satisfactory likeness" of his father he had ever seen.

Photo courtesy of the David Davis Mansion, photo by Patricia Schley.

Yuletide on the Prairie

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dren's silk handkerchiefs, four linen handkerchiefs, and three "gents" silk handkerchiefs (for a total of \$3.13) on December 24th, according to Harry Pratt's *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln* (The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1943).

Christmas sleigh riding was also popular then, but some of the drivers could have used a sleigh driver's ed class. The December 27, 1860 *Illinois State Journal* commented on the Christmas rides around Springfield's downtown square. "Never did the streets of this city present a more attractive and brilliant appearance than on Christmas day, as the dashing cavalcade of sleighs went whirling around the public square, the musical cadence of the merry bells keeping time to the monotonous tramp of the spirited horses. Joyous and happy shouts of laughter saluted the ear everywhere as the many loads of pleasure seekers went gliding by..."

Bet the two little boys who got run over by sleighs that day weren't laughing. Neither was injured, the paper said, but one "was rather indignant."

Chocolate Cockroaches

Later in this Victorian period, when Christmas was becoming a full blown holiday with some of the modern trappings, Illinoisans and others started making and giving special treats for the holiday.

"In those days they didn't have candy available all the time like we do, so candy was a big deal to kids. Getting candy only happened on very special occasions," says Marcia Young, site manager for the David Davis Mansion, a state historic site in Bloomington. Young has researched the evolution of Christmas traditions and especially those celebrated by Judge David Davis and his wife Sarah. (She wrote about them in *Christmas in Illinois*). Today, the Mansion is decked out every holiday season to reflect those celebrations. One must-have item is chocolate cockroaches -- not the real bugs, but chocolate versions.

The Victorians gave children candy in their stockings or as gifts. Some were chocolates molded to look like lobsters, carrots, beetles, spiders, or cockroaches. "That was a time in which a lot of exploration was occurring all over the globe," Young explains. "The Victorians were very excited about what they were finding. They loved the natural world, even the smallest parts, like insects. When they were making candy, they created candy in shapes of things that are part of the natural world."

Today the Mansion sells the chocolate roaches for 95 cents apiece in its gift shop, and Young says people have driven from as far away as Lincoln merely to buy the unusual treats.

Ashes and Furs

In Chicago, Christmas of 1871 was a time to mourn and a time to celebrate. Chicagoans were still grieving because the Great Fire that October had killed nearly 100,000 people and destroyed much of their city. Those remaining celebrated because they survived and the city was rebuilding from ashes.

According to Eloise Jordan in *Christmas in Illinois*, donated holiday gifts of toys and necessities flooded the city from around the world. "At the same time," she writes, "it is interesting to note the Christmas items advertised by the merchants: mink, ermine, and seal furs for the ladies; jewelry; boots and shoes; crockery; fashionable millinery; stereoscopic and photographic views of Chicago before and after the Fire; books; and of all things, canaries!"



*May this holiday season
and your New Year be happy,
healthy, and free of fire,
sleigh wrecks, and blizzards.*

In Memoriam

On December 1, Republican State Rep. **Rich Myers** died in Colchester from cancer. He had represented western Illinois in the House of Representatives since 1995. He was 62.

ILLINOIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SCHEDULE

96th Illinois General Assembly:

January, 2011

- 3 - House - Session, 3 p.m. (and 112th U.S. Congress convenes)
- 4 - House and Senate - Session
- 5 - House and Senate - Session
- 6 - House and Senate - Session
- 7 - House - Session
- 9 - House - Session in late afternoon
- 10 - House - Session and Illinois Constitutional Officers sworn in
- 11 - House - Session (The 96th Illinois General Assembly has until noon this day to finish its business)

97th Illinois General Assembly

January, 2011

- 12 - House and Senate Inauguration at noon, House - Session
- 13 - House - Session
- 17 - **Martin Luther King Jr., Day - state holiday**
- 21 - House - Perfunctory Session
- 25 - House - Perfunctory Session
- 28 - House - Perfunctory Session
- 31 - House - Perfunctory Session

February, 2011

- 1 - House - Session
- 2 - House - Session
- 3 - House - Perfunctory Session
- 4 - House - Perfunctory Session (House Deadline LRB requests)

Transitions

Illinois State Sen. Gary Dahl, a Republican from Granville, retired on Dec. 10. He was elected to the Senate in 2004. He owns the Double D Express and Double D Warehouse in Granville.

Lt. Governor-elect Sheila Simon has appointed Deirdre "D.K." Hirner as her chief of staff. She was a staff member for Missouri Governors Bob Holden and Mel Carnahan.

On December 3, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn named Eileen R. Mackevich to head the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. She was Executive Director of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and Co-Founder and President of the Chicago Humanities Festival.

