

## Spirits high for Depression-era Christmas

During the 1936 Christmas season, Americans faced an Ebenezer Scrooge writ large — the hard times of the Great Depression. Even so, most area residents weren't willing to let the “bah humbug” economy define their holidays.

Beginning Monday, Dec. 21, downtown Bloomington retail stores remained open until 9 p.m. each day through Christmas Eve. (Back then, they were normally closed evenings except Fridays and Saturdays.) The McLean County Courthouse was also illuminated for the holidays, giving downtown, it was said, “a gala air.”

That's not to say there wasn't plenty of distress — economic or otherwise — in the Twin Cities a full 83 Christmases ago. The Pantagraph's Goodfellow Fund was around in 1936, though the annual giving campaign was then spelled as two words. At this time, the fund provided fresh fruit and toys for needy children ages 12 and under, as well as canned food for families.

Many of these Good Fellow toys came from the Bloomington Municipal Recreation Board, a creation of the Works Progress Administration, one of the Roosevelt administration's cornerstone New Deal programs. The Bloomington board and its Normal counterpart sponsored a Santa's workshop whereby volunteers reconditioned used or damaged toys collected by area Boy Scouts. Sixty some “elves” worked in shifts from 6 a.m. to midnight. There were another 24 women primarily engaged in making doll clothes.

Great State Theaters, Inc., owners of the Irvin, Castle and Majestic theaters in downtown Bloomington, staged a benefit Saturday morning, December 19, whereby a donated can of food served as admission. All told, more than 1,600 cans were gathered for the Good Fellow campaign.

Many of those fortunate enough to have steady employment in 1936 welcomed the hustle and bustle of holiday commerce and industry. America once moved by rail, and at the Alton Railroad Shops on Bloomington's west side, passenger locomotives were given precedence over their freight counterparts in anticipation of the year-end increase in ridership. Accordingly, from Dec. 9 to Dec. 22, seven passenger locomotives were “shopped, repaired and placed in service.”

In the second week of December, Bloomington banker and nurseryman Grover C. Helm announced the arrival by railcar of Rocky Mountain balsams. “The finest car of Christmas trees received in years,” declared Helm. “Will not shed their needles.”

On December 20, Ainsworth Ice Co., 505 S. McClun St., announced the arrival of a railcar's worth of Florida oranges ("tree-ripened, not colored.") They also had tangerines and grapefruit on hand.

And what would the holidays be without family get-togethers centered on a traditional meal? Nierstheimer Bros. grocery (with two locations—downtown Bloomington and the 1400 block of West Washington Street) offered dressed goose and duck at 22 cents a pound. (Adjusted for inflation, 22 cents would be equal to \$4 today.) And in a nod to Bloomington's old Swedish community, they also sold lingonberries and lutefisk.

Many big-ticket items were at rock-bottom prices, helped by the low demand for consumer durables during the Depression. Several local businesses, including J.A. Keck Furniture Co., were selling—"at the lowest prices in history!"—locally manufactured Ice-O-Matic electric refrigerators. "As little as \$3.50 [a month] puts one of these big, powerful Ice-O-Matics in your kitchen ... and 36 months to pay balance!" read one advertisement.

Chadband's, a popular downtown jewelry store, promised "convenient credit at no extra cost." Stern's, which billed itself as "Central Illinois' busiest furniture store," offered a new 1937 Philco radio for \$49.95, or as little as 50 cents a week on the installment plan. (By the way, that \$49.95 would be the equivalent of \$920 today!)

This was a time when four locally owned department stores—C.W. Klemm, W.H. Roland, A. Livingston & Sons and Newmarket—went head-to-head against three national chains—Montgomery Ward, Penney's and Sears Roebuck—in downtown Bloomington. Remarkably, all were situated within a block or so of the courthouse square.

Roland's featured a "toyland" in its basement stocked with things like the two-foot tall "Ma-Ma" talking doll for \$3.98, and a Streak-o-Lite steel wagon with working headlights and a "horn that toots and toots!" for \$4.95. Roland's also had "Midget Town" wood building block sets (commercially manufactured in Bloomington by general contractor Charles E. Hall) for \$1 and \$1.98, and three pound boxes of Paul F. Beich Co. "Lady Betty" chocolates for \$1.

The Pantagraph asked several area children what they were expecting from Old Saint Nick. "I don't need any more dolls, but I'd like to get some new clothes for the three I have," said seven-year-old Phyllis Bender. Others, such as eight-year-old Roderic Abbott, Jr., were decidedly more ambitious. "I'd like to get a streamline train, a Tom Mix pistol, a toy 'Tommy' machine gun, a cowboy suit and some autos and trucks," he said.

As Christmas Day neared, the Young Men's Club, in the form of Al Hale dressed as Santa Claus, distributed toys, clothing and candy to 18 boys and girls at the McLean County Colored Children's Home. The Young Men's Club also hosted a dinner at the Illinois Hotel for the residents of Victory Hall, a boys' home in Normal. Santa Claus made an appearance here as well, divvying out everything from fountain pens to "big, sturdy sleds."

On Wednesday, December 23, the 11th annual Children's Christmas Jubilee was held at Bloomington High School. In order to accommodate 5,000 area schoolchildren, three programs were held in the morning and two in the afternoon. The program included Christmas carols and the dramatization of "Jiminy Christmas," a short story written by Genevieve White, an English instructor at Illinois Wesleyan University. Each child also received a bag of Beich candy.

That same evening—Dec. 23, the "eve of Christmas Eve"—The Pantagraph sponsored the 10th annual "Christmas Carol Sing" on the courthouse square (see accompanying photograph.) The caroling began at 5:15 p.m. with an estimated 1,500 area residents (including 400 seventh and eighth graders) gathered on the west side of the courthouse.

At the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School, the state orphanage in Normal, Christmas Day festivities began at 6 a.m. with a brass ensemble parading from one residential cottage to another. Soon thereafter, members of the Louis E. Davis American Legion post and the local chapter of the United Spanish War Veterans distributed gifts to more than 800 children.

Several restaurants remained open on Dec. 25. For 80 cents, the Quality Cafe, 414 N. Main St., offered an expansive Christmas Day menu that included Gelbach roast turkey, stuffed baked Watertown goose, Brussels sprout hollandaise, fancy California asparagus tips on toast and homemade hot mince pie.

Unfortunately for area children with sleds under the Christmas tree, 1936 would prove to be one of the warmest holidays in memory. On Christmas Day, in fact, temperatures reached a high of 58 degrees.