

A PIONEER CHRISTMAS

This year as we prepare for our holiday celebrations, I thought it appropriate to pause and reflect on the way the pioneers who came to Alpine in the late 1800's may have celebrated Christmas. For most of the early settlers in Alpine, times were hard. Their celebrations were very different from the sparkling displays that we have come to expect today. On the other hand, Christmas was celebrated in much the same way—with family and friends. Absent from their celebrations were the huge malls and toy stores, the twinkling electric lights, the abundance of food on the shelves of grocery stores and the convenience foods all packaged and ready to go. Imagine a pioneer woman's amazement if she were to see what is available to us today!

Pioneers prepared for Christmas by making gifts for one another. Some would take weeks to make, so preparation began early. The children's toys were made by parents and grandparents. Dolls were fashioned of scraps of cloth, left over from clothing made by the women, button eyes and yarn hair. The bodies and heads were stuffed with whatever material was available. Careful stitches outlined the doll's facial features. Clothing was fashioned, again from scraps of material left over from other projects. Wooden toys for the boys were carved from wood and put together in secret for that happy day. Sachets, pillows, footstools and embroidered hankies were made and scarves, hats, mittens and socks were knitted. Since money was scarce, materials used to fashion gifts was from whatever was available. If the harvest had been good that year, stockings were hung and filled with presents along with cookies and fruit.

If there was room in the tiny homes, the men and boys and sometimes the entire family would go out and search for a Christmas tree. When the perfect tree was found, it was set up in the home and decorated with loving care. The ornaments used for these trees were simple. Scraps of paper or yarn, strings of popcorn, cones and nuts from trees, homemade yarn or corn husk dolls and cookie dough ornaments could be found on these lovely trees. If paper was available, the children would cut stars, snowmen, angels and paper rings to decorate the tree.

Sometimes some of the families had ornaments which had been handed down from another lifetime. Hand-blown glass ornaments may have come from Europe, carefully packed and carried, when their grandparents or great grandparents came to this country. These ornaments were very precious as they represented Christmas past from other places and other times and they always took a place of honor on the family's tree.

Christmas Eve found the family gathered together singing the age-old Carols of Christmas and preparing for the excitement of the coming day.

The Christmas dinner was planned and preparation of the food began weeks ahead of time. Wild turkeys were hunted and fruit from their own trees was baked into wonderful pies. Bread was baked in the fireplace. Often several families got together to share their feast, with each family supplying a dish. Always, they attended church and then visited with neighbors and friends. The excitement of love shared on Christmas day helped to make up for hardships suffered during the past year. For a while, these pioneer families could relax and forget their everyday problems. They could remember and talk of the Christmases of their childhood and the Christmases yet to come.

I reflect on the Christmases past and wonder at the fact that the most wonderful memories are based on simple things—making cookies with the kids, creating homemade ornaments for the tree, going for a walk after Christmas dinner. The glitter fades and ceases to be important when we consider the true meaning of the holidays—family, friends, loved ones all!

Note: Preparations are underway to ensure that the Alpine Historical Society's pioneer houses will be decked out in old-fashioned ornaments for the Alpine Woman's Club Holiday Home Tour, Christmas in Alpine, on December 7. The tour will be wonderful and we hope to see you as you share in our Christmas of yesteryear.

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