



Buffalo Tales



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Celebrating Christmas in Ravenna in the Early Years

by Valerie Vierk

Many have read the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder and noted that even on the frontier with few stores, little materials, Christmas was still celebrated and charming gifts were fashioned from the meager materials at hand. In one of the books Laura tells of the Christmas when she and Mary received a shiny new penny, which was a wonderful treasure, and an apple or an orange, also rare gifts for children living on the frontier in the 1880's. They were delighted by these gifts, which seem very meager by today's standards. In *My Antonia*, written by Willa Cather, Jim tells of Antonia's father coming into Jim's grandparents' house, seeing the little cedar Christmas tree and falling to his knees in reverence.

Almost as soon as small towns sprang up, citizens also began planning community Christmas celebrations. This article will list a few of the celebrations and one accidental happening in the little town of Ravenna, founded in 1886 when the railroad came through. By 1920, Ravenna's population had grown to 1,700, certainly large enough to plan some lovely celebrations.

December 15, 1922 - The large headlines read: "Christmas Radiant Spectacle." The [Erastus] Smith tree would not be used this year because the event planned was to be much larger than usual. (The 40-foot Smith tree stood in the founder of Ravenna's yard that was located a few yards west of upper main street and was used as the community Christmas tree a couple years.) This year Peter Christianson donated a large and shapely tree that would be brought in from his farm and erected in the parking on Grand Avenue, just north of the Syracuse street intersection. Mr. Shellenbarger of the Ravenna Electric Light and Power Co., would donate the current to illuminate the tree every night for the entire holiday week, from Christmas Eve until New Year's Eve. Funds were being raised to provide a treat for every child. Orders had been placed for 350 pounds of mixed candies, 175 pounds of nuts, and two barrels of apples. The American Legion and its ladies auxiliary would be cooperating with the women's club and church aid societies in this undertaking.

December 22, 1922 - The headlines stated the large community Christmas tree was in place at the intersection of Grand Avenue and Syracuse Street at the northern tip of the business district where it commanded a view of the principal business district. Candy sacks, (which were to also include fruit and nuts) for 1,000 children were being prepared by the ladies of the various women's clubs. The number of sacks was increased to make sure no children would be overlooked since children from the surrounding countryside were expected to attend the festivities. Gus Holub was wiring the tree in preparation to illuminating it with more than one hundred colored lights. Other decorations would also be added. The *Ravenna News* stated "Communication has been established with Santa Claus over Doc. Tomiska's radio, which brings information that he will be here, if the weather is good, and if the program has to be postponed on account of bad weather, he promises to make a special trip to Ravenna."

WITH THE SOCIETY

A Note from the President:

As I sit down and start to prepare this final message for 2001, I glance out the window and see a trace of snow. It feels like our great Fall weather has come to an end and winter may really be here.

This past year has brought a lot of activity at the Trails & Rails Museum. I am not going to list all of them, but here are three or four things that have happened.

In January, the Board of Directors hired a Society Director, Sherrie Dux-Ideus. This was made possible with the help of the Kearney Community Foundation paying half of her salary. We are pleased to have someone with her expertise in the operation of the museum.

Another highlight was a cash gift from Myrna Axmann for a gazebo to be built on the museum grounds. With lots of volunteer help to construct it, we were able to come up with a nice large gazebo.

We are also very grateful for the sizeable monetary gift from the Estate of Dellores Nolte.

In November the Board received a letter of resignation from Mardi Anderson who has served as our treasurer for the past 10 years. The Board of Directors want to express our thanks to her for all she has done for the Society serving in that capacity.

In closing, I want to thank the Board of Directors, the Society and Museum Directors, the Treasurer and all the many volunteers for helping to make this a great year, and I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year!

-Larry Nansel, President

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The program would open with an invocation by Rev. Rush of the M.E. church, who would also read the Scriptural Christmas story. Song sheets had been printed containing the words of several Christmas carols as well as "American the Beautiful," "There's a Song in the Air," and "My Country 'tis of Thee." These would be sung under the direction of Roy Greenslit. Additionally, the high school orchestra under the direction of Barta Kase (a cobbler) would contribute several selections.

December 29, 1929 - The headlines read, "Five Thousand People At Xmas Exercises." The article then stated that the crowd was estimated at from three to five thousand. Everything moved without a hitch except for a brief time when a fuse was blown and the tree was enshrouded in darkness. Santa Claus arrived in a Ford instead of a sleigh because of the balmy weather and no snow on the ground. He spent an hour driving around greeting the children. Rumor had it that he arrived by a plane that touched down at the city limits but the exact location was not known. (There was a landing strip just northeast of Ravenna in those days, about a half mile east of the present day Grand Manor.) The ceremony started at 7:30 p.m. and lasted an hour, after which the crowd dispersed to attend their family celebrations. The crowd was said to be the largest assembled in years.

In other news, the local postmaster, Mr. Howard, reported that in the five days before Christmas the office did the biggest business the postmaster recalled. About one hundred parcel post packages were processed each day and Mr. Howard personally worked until noon on Christmas day delivering all the parcels to local patrons.

December 17, 1926 - Local dairyman, Emory Peters donated the large cedar tree which was placed at the intersection of Grand Avenue and Genoa Street, which was at the south end of the business district. The tree was from forty to fifty years old and was planted by Obed Riddle, the original homesteader of the

present Emory Peters dairy farm. The paper stated that Obed was "an Englishman and a bachelor, somewhat uncouth and crusty in demeanor, but somewhere in his makeup was a lover of trees and flowers and the beautiful things of nature..." Obed had planted many trees on his homestead, including the present tree that was being used as a Christmas tree. This cedar was originally planted in the dooryard of his little old "soddy" but when newer buildings were erected on the place they were built in another location, and this tree and others were left standing in what eventually became cultivated fields. "Mr. Riddle did not live to see the fulfillment of his dream, that of having wooded slopes and shady dells along the little brook that meandered across his land." He had met accidental death years before when he was pinned under a load of lumber.

Another entry in the paper stated that Grand Avenue, in the business district gave the impression of a "glimpse into Fairyland with the festoons of colored lights draped gracefully from the top of the 90-foot flag pole at the Genoa Street intersection that form a canopy over the Christmas tree." Additionally strings of brilliant lights were draped over the sidewalks in front of most of the business houses that combined to make quite a gorgeous spectacle at night.

January 21, 1927 - Shortly before Christmas 1926 Dr. J. B. Conn mailed a number of Christmas cards, some of which were addressed to his father's distant relatives in Holland. While sending these cards to foreign addresses, Dr. Conn hit upon the idea of sending one to the former German Kaiser at House Doorn in Holland. A couple weeks after Christmas the doctor received a letter containing a personally autographed card portrait of the late Kaiser, accompanied by a letter that was translated as a brief thank you for his letter and best wishes for Christmas and the New Year. The doctor valued this letter highly and planned to preserve it among his keepsakes.

December 28, 1928 - The front page of the *Ravenna News* ran the headlines: "Play Santa Claus to Kids on Train." This event occurred on passenger train #44 that passed through Ravenna for many years. The morning of Christmas Eve a destitute widow and four small children boarded the train in Montana enroute to the mother's family in Tennessee. After paying the fares they barely had money to buy a little food to take on the journey. In the afternoon a Mr. Thrasher of Kansas City, who was the steward (cook) on the dining car, walked through the train and asked the children if Santa Claus was going to visit them this year.

The children replied, "Mama said Santa Claus would not visit them this year." Upon hearing this Mr. Thrasher took the mother and children back to the dining car where he fed them a turkey dinner. He then took the Christmas tree out of the dining car and set it up in the car occupied by the family. Next he showed the children where to hang their stockings and then shooed them off to bed.

When the train reached Ravenna about 8 p.m., Mr. Thrasher and another unknown man who had taken an interest in the family dashed up to Hosek's Variety Store and purchased an armload of toys for the children. They were a little late getting back to the train, but the crew held the train for them. The paper stated that the train pulled out for the east a little late, but "bearing with it a much happier widowed mother with four overjoyed small children, and two men in which the true Christmas spirit was personified."

December 13, 1929 - The stock market had crashed two months before in far away New York, but Ravenna hadn't yet felt the effects. The local paper reported that merchants had taken in the largest stock of Christmas items ever reported. Hosek's Variety Store listed dolls ranging in price from \$.05 to \$6.50, doll beds from \$.35 to \$1.00 and strangely enough, doll "cabs" (carriages) from \$2.98 to \$4.50. For the boys there were mechanical trains from \$.48 to \$2.95 and toy guns from \$.15 to \$2.00.

This year Santa arrived in a 6-passenger Stinson monoplane! At the appointed time, 1:30 p.m., his plane was spotted in the skies above Ravenna. It

circled the town several times, then proceeded to the designated spot northeast of town and Santa parachuted to earth from a height of 2,800 feet! Witnesses stated it was a pretty sight seeing the old fellow floating to earth in his brilliant red suit. He was then whisked to town where he greeted the children for two hours before heading on to Auburn, NE to greet more children. Later Santa stated that it was a good thing he jumped from 2,800 feet because he parachute didn't open properly and he estimated he fell a thousand feet before the wind caught it right and the parachute opened! Ravenna News editor, C.B. Cass stated that if he wasn't positive the old fellow was Santa Claus himself he'd guess he looked a lot like W.F. Wagner, representative of the Barclay-Hare Co. of St. Joseph, MO and Pawnee, NE and his assistant flying the plane looked a lot like Mr. Hare himself.



TOYS OF EVERY KIND

And that's Not All—We have gifts for everyone, in our complete stock!

For the Children

Mechanical Trains	48c to 2.95
Dolls, Exchange from	5c to \$5.50
Doll Cabs	\$2.98 to 4.50
Wagons	95c to 4.50
Chairs	25c to 1.85
Doll Beds	35c to 1.00
Areopieces	10c to 1.19
Toy Dishes	15c to 2.95
Wood Blocks	10c to 1.00
Books	5c to .45
Games and Puzzles	10c to 1.15
Two-Act	15c to 2.00

For Her

Silk Hosiery	15c to 2.95
Silk Pyjamas	10c to 1.00
Bloomers or Suits	5c to .45
Combs to brush	10c to 1.15
Watches and Hand	15c to 2.00

Hosek Variety Store
WATCH OUR WINDOWS

November 18, 1932 - The Depression hit the little town hard and by late 1931 the three banks all failed. In January 1932 the new Ravenna Bank opened its doors after three months with no banking system in the town. With most people nearly destitute, the merchants valiantly struggled to promote some business. The J.L. Motsick Rexall drug store sponsored a doll give away in which fifteen lucky little girls would receive dolls. The finest dolls in the country were selected for prizes; some walked and some talked. The rules were that for every **penny** spent at the store, a customer could cast a vote for a certain little girl. In case of a tie, each girl would receive a doll.

Temperatures plunged to -22 degrees in the week before Christmas and snow accompanied the cold temperatures. Thus, Santa arrived in town on Saturday afternoon, December 17 in a fancy cutter pulled by one of his favorite ponies. He handed out several hundred sacks of candy.

The town also was treated to a free community cantata entitled, "O Holy Night" that was performed at the Pastime Theatre on two nights. Twenty-two singers and eighteen orchestra members provided the music. The first night the theatre was packed and some people had to be turned away; the second night the theatre was nearly filled. An estimated 1,000 people viewed the performances, some so enthralled with the performance that they returned the second night. Mr. James Kyndle conceived the idea of the cantata and directed the choir and orchestra. The musicians had practiced all through the fall months.

The local paper also ran a "cartoon" entitled "Lest We Forget" that depicted a man and woman making out their Christmas gift list with the man asking, "Have We Forgotten Anyone?" Two destitute people were shown above and behind the couple in a specter-type portrayal.

December 31, 1937 - With the country deep in the Great Depression, Christmas found the American Legion Auxiliary playing the role of Santa Claus to numerous aged and needy people in the community again this year. No "pound party" for collection of food and clothing was held this year, thus sparing the Auxiliary the expenses of a party to collect items. Instead, donations were received at the local post office. The donations were also larger this year. One hundred fifty bags of treats were distributed, also 50 gifts for children, 28 boxes of food and clothing and 16 boxes of fruit for "shut-ins." Besides this, several pairs of overshoes and other clothes were added. Santa Claus delivered the gifts on Christmas Eve and he was "loudly and joyfully received, especially by the youngsters in the homes."

The "Yesteryear" notes of the paper noted that forty years before, on December 31, 1897, Mr. Tony Tomiska and Miss Rose Hlava were married under a large bell of roses and beneath a bower of mistletoe and holly at the home of the bride's parents.

There would be four more meager Christmases before Pearl Harbor would plunge the nation into war and thus bring the Great Depression to an end. Until then, the people would do the best they could with limited resources to have happy Christmases for themselves and others less fortunate.



15
Beautiful
dolls
given away!

Some Talk! Some Walk!

The Finest Dolls in the Country have been selected as Prizes.

They will be Given Away to the fifteen little girls receiving the largest number of votes in The Rexall Drug Store Doll Contest. The awards will be made Christmas Day **CONTEST NOW ON!**

For each penny spent at our store during the period stated below each customer may cast a vote. Ask all your friends to write your name on the ballot before they put it into the Ballot Box in our store.

RULES GOVERNING THE REXALL DRUG STORE DOLL CONTEST FOR 1937

1. No girl over 12 years old may enter.
2. Only one nomination blank to be placed to the credit of each contestant.
3. Any piece of paper may be used as a ballot. Every ballot must be stamped by the proprietor, or one of our sales force, before being deposited in the Ballot Box.
4. No contestant shall solicit votes or customers while in the store. No Ballot Blanks to be taken from the store.
5. No Ballots may be deposited in the Ballot Box before November 15th or after 10 o'clock, Christmas Eve.
6. No Ballots will be given except at actual time of sale. Do not ask for them at any other time.
7. Any Ballot, showing traces of any change in number of votes marked will be destroyed without being counted.
8. In the event of a tie for any prize offered, a prize identical with that tied for will be awarded to each tying contestant.

Come in any time after the middle of November and see the beautiful prizes. Ask any questions you wish about the Contest, because we are glad to have you do so.

**One Vote May Be Cast For Every Penny
Spent In Our Store**

J. L. Motsick

The Rexall Drug Store

SOURCES

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Dr. Roger P. Davis, Editor

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Institutional Membership \$20.00
Supporting Membership \$30.00+
Life memberships are \$150.00 for individual;
\$200.00 for husband and wife.

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TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM

As I write this the 14th Annual Christmas Tree Walk is under way. So far, the weather has cooperated and attendance has been good. The trees are beautiful this year and each year I think they are prettier than before. Everyone is very creative.

We have had music each day and really do appreciate those who have provided. Evelyn Johnson and Howard Kolbo have played the pump organ. The many volunteers who manned the buildings are much appreciated. Everyone who works on this is unpaid except our Society Director.

Many things are being planned for next year and again we will be calling on volunteers. We will again have paid guides during the summer but also need volunteers. If you have suggestions or ideas, please let us know. If you are willing to help and are not called, call us. We appreciate you all.

We wish you a Merry Christmas and make it a Happy Fun New Year!

-Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

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