

Our Times

The People, History, and Culture of
Logan County, Illinois

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The mission of *Our Times* is to publish well-researched, interesting articles about the people, history, and culture of Logan County, Illinois.

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Publisher's Notes

Howie Long asked Mike Ditka if a poor showing as coach of the New Orleans Saints would tarnish the reputation he built as a winner with the Chicago Bears. Ditka answered that "the glory of my life is not to be found on this earth." Iron Mike said this on national television on Thanksgiving day, and I take it as an expression of faith.

Just two nights before Ditka's testimonial, a TV report on the McCaughey septuplets unflinchingly documented the prayer chains that miraculously reversed a critical lack of amniotic fluid surrounding one of the fetuses and, later, ended baby Joel's near-fatal internal bleeding. These two dramatic episodes of healing through prayer were pearls on a string of declarations of faith by the McCaughey parents, their friends and family, and their two doctors, all reported without embarrassment on network TV.

Have you heard about Kevin Sharp, the country music phenomenon who was diagnosed with cancer at age 18, given little chance to live, and at 25 has hit the top of the music charts? Sharp brings terminally-ill children on stage at his concerts, letting them fulfill their wishes by singing with him.

O.K., baby boomers, did you ever think you'd see such a day? A music idol who extols God's blessings and embraces sick kids, journalists who examine the power of prayer without cynicism, and a tough old football coach who is storing up treasures in heaven: who woulda thunk? The 60's flower children had an other-worldly aura, but by the time they got to San Francisco their proclamations of peace and love were mumbled through dope-numbered lips. In the real world, we expected NASA to probe the metaphysical frontiers; and we cast a skeptical eye on anything not proven at a .01 degree of significance by an Ivy League research department. I'll admit, I have said I don't believe anything until it passes muster with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*. But I haven't said that lately.

Have times changed? *Our times*? Are we now prepared, indeed eager, to accept what we cannot explain? World-weary, do we, this Christmas season, open our hearts to the peace that passes understanding? Do we search the winter-night skies, not for a close encounter of the third kind, but for the star of Bethlehem? SR

(Continued from page 1, *Light...*)

up a collection. Although the meal was eventually discontinued, the annual party was held until after the war.

Imagine yourself sitting in the sleigh beside Santa, as the Christmas parade winds its way around the Lincoln city square. Santa has arrived at the airport and been escorted downtown by a caravan of new cars. While the high school band and the State School drum and bugle corps play in the background, Santa talks to you about your Christmas. It's 1955; you're five years old; and

when they lifted you into that sleigh, you got goose bumps.

Christmas has always been about joy.

Just ask Dennis Graue, the little boy from Elkhart in the story above. "I thought I was something," he smiles. "My Christmas was going to be wonderful. I got to ride in the parade with Santa Claus."

The Lincoln Christmas parade has a long history. For many years, merchants hired outside firms to bring in characters like Snow White to parade with Santa. Then in 1941, they gave money instead to local organizations to help pay for original floats. The resulting parade was a big success.

Over the years, Santa has arrived in Lincoln in a variety of ways and set up shop in stores, in the rotunda of the courthouse, and in a hut on the courthouse lawn. In the forties, the Jay Gould organization was hired by the Lincoln Retail Merchants association to welcome him with a parade that was followed by a stage show on the square.

Rosemary Taylor Zimmerman remembers that in 1960, her husband, Ken, helped arrange for Santa to arrive downtown by helicopter. As the helicopter left, 1000 ping pong balls, redeemable for gift certificates from local stores, were dropped to the crowds.

Unfortunately, many of the ping pong balls landed on the roofs of Landauer's, Montgomery Ward, and Spurgeon's, causing people to run up and "tramp around" on the roofs, trying to find them. Ken got lots of phone calls from retailers when he got home that night. His answer to Norman Landauer was, "Mr. Norm, I've got my bags packed; and I'm leaving town."

After an absence of many years, the Christmas parade was reinstated as a nighttime event in 1971. When the lights on the courthouse trees were turned on for the first time by Congressman Edward Madigan in 1977, they made a sparkling backdrop for the parade. Although the parade was moved to a Saturday morning in 1978, it's been held at night again ever since 1989. ■

O Christmas Tree!

Susan Kinsey Dehner remembers Thanksgiving as a working day. While her mother and grandmother busied themselves in the kitchen, her father and grandfather were out harvesting Christmas trees to sell in Susan's family's back yard in Lincoln.

Begun in 1957 as a source of income for college, the Christmas tree business was a family enterprise that involved Susan; her parents, "Bud" and Vera Kinsey; her grandparents, John and Jessie Kinsey; her brother, John; and her sister, Carol. The Curry boys who lived next door put in their share of hard work, too.

In their biggest years, the Kinseys sold an average of 600-700 trees from their farm in San Jose. For several years, their trees were entered at the State Fair, where they won first in several categories, as well as Grand Champion and Reserve Champion.

Producing a well-shaped tree took 8-10 years, so the Kinseys bought from other suppliers until their trees were large enough to sell. After a tree was 2 or 3 years old, it was sheared once a season; before it was sold, it was sprayed with green color at least once.

Probably the most rewarding aspect of the business was that people appreciated the trees so much. Susan's father bent over backwards to accommodate his customers, even drilling a hole and adding a branch in a bare spot when needed.

As the business grew, the Kinseys sold wreaths, centerpieces, door swags, bunches of greens, and grave blankets, as well. But all that came to an end on Friday, March 13th, 1981, when fire destroyed most of the Christmas tree farm.

After selling the few remaining trees, the Kinseys retired from the Christmas tree business in 1984. Now living in Tremont, Bud and Vera remember the good times and wish all their customers and friends a "Merry Christmas."



The Kinsey family's championship Christmas tree at the Illinois State Fair in 1971.

Other Christmas Tree Memories

Bob Sullivan remembers that as soon as Elmer Brown got his trees in at the Basket Grocery, his dad would bring one home. He especially remembers a beautiful full tree that was covered with little pine cones.

Bob was chairman of the Kiwanis tree sales for many years and remembers ordering large trees for the banks and people with tall ceilings, ice storms when trees couldn't be sold until they thawed, 15-degree days when trees sold fast, and the year the scaffolding holding the trees collapsed.

Bob also remembers the year he found himself out in the middle of Woodlawn Road at 5:00 AM, picking up trees that high winds had blown out of the lot.

Today, sales are hurt by the multitude of \$15 trees available at large chain stores. However, like the Jaycees, who have sold trees for many years, the Kiwanians have many repeat customers who like to patronize a service organization.

Howard Logan opened the Dairy Queen in Lincoln in May of 1950. Since that first season was a short one, he decided to supplement his income by selling Christmas trees. That venture was so successful that he continued doing it.

At first, the only trees available were Douglas fir and balsam; and an average tree sold for about \$5.00. But by 1957, Howard was including flocked trees in his *Courier* ads. He began by flocking his trees in an unheated building at the fairgrounds. In later years, he worked in a heated building on his lot.

When Howard first began flocking trees, he used two paint spray guns and two quart jars: one filled with adhesive and one with flock. The first step was to spray the tree with adhesive. The next step was a little more difficult: with a gun in each hand, Howard sprayed on the flock and the adhesive at the same time. One last spray with adhesive, and the tree was finished.

Constantly refilling quart jars was time-consuming; fortunately, before too many years, Howard had a machine that held enough flock to do two trees. Today the adhesive is in the flock; so the first spray is water, the second is flock and water, and the third is another light coat of water.

Although Howard sold 6 or 7 white trees for every colored tree he sold, he also sold pink, gold, orchid, green, and blue trees. He chuckles when he remembers the woman who wanted a gold tree to match her ornaments, only to find out that gold ornaments don't show up on a gold tree. Howard and his wife, Marie, liked a white tree with blue ornaments. ■

Information for this issue came from interviews with Logan County residents. Additional material was gleaned from past issues of the Courier.

Correction: John Verderber was born in Austria-Hungary, not in the U.S. as stated in the last issue.

Christmas Remembered



Jane Mier Remembers

When Jane Wilson Mier was a child and woke up “at the crack of dawn” on Christmas morning, she didn’t run down to see the Christmas tree. The house she grew up in north of Beason was too small for a tree, so each of the four children still at home found their presents from Santa piled on a separate chair.



Jane Mier wearing lapel watch. (See story, back page.)

Jane was born in 1913; so apples, oranges, and nuts were a special part of her Christmas. In addition, Santa always brought one nice gift: a fountain pen from the jewelry store, a cameo, a necklace, clothes, or a doll.

Jane still remembers the year her sister Elsie got a fountain pen for Christmas. When Jane got chicken pox at the end of that school year, Elsie was sent to stay with her grandparents so she wouldn’t get them, too. Getting out of the buggy on her way to school one day, she dropped her precious fountain pen. The horses ran over it and broke it “all to pieces.” Elsie started to cry, and she cried all day until she ran a fever and had to be taken home to “be with Jane.”

Of course, then she got chicken pox, too, and ended up missing her finals at school and having to make them up at the courthouse. And all because of a Christmas present.

After Jane’s family had their own Christmas, they went to the home of her grandfather, John Evans, where more presents—and a tree—were awaiting them.

When Jane’s family arrived at her grandfather’s home on Broadway Street in Lincoln, near the Grand Theatre, the doors to the high-ceilinged parlor were closed. After a “huge” dinner of turkey, dressing, scalloped oysters, and all the trimmings, the parlor doors were opened. Strings of popcorn circled the decorated tree, and presents for the “houseful of people” were clustered at its foot.

When Jane grew up and began to teach at Beason, her principal was George B. Shive, “just a big kid,” who believed in Christmas—and Christmas programs. So Jane’s first and second-graders put on a style show as the dolls of Santa Claus. Jane chose an “ornery little first-grader” to dress as a baby and hide in a baby carriage that was pushed by another child. Just as the carriage arrived in front of the audience, the “baby” sat up and said, “Hi!” That was just one of many Christmas programs during forty years of teaching school.

It was while she was teaching fourth grade at Central School that Jane received her most unusual gift from a child—a bottle of wine. While the giver hid under her desk, Jane tried to think of something to say. Finally she managed to murmur, “Oh my, this will be nice to cook with.”

The teachers always gave gifts to the children, as well. When Jane taught at Washington-Monroe, the gifts were Christmas ornaments, an idea Jane’s co-worker Thelma Lilley had used when she taught in Pennsylvania.

Jane always had two trees after she grew up: one at home and one in her classroom. As for Christmas Day, she spent it as she had as a child: with her large extended family. Jane and her husband, John, took their turn as hosts and for many years also held a New Year’s Eve party, which started as a party for January birthdays and “kept getting bigger.”

Henrietta Branom Remembers

Henrietta Knecht Branom, 93, remembers lighted paraffin candles on the Christmas tree, with a bucket of water close by.

Henrietta remembers the Christmas program at St. John’s Evangelical Church and can still sing a few phrases from a German song the minister’s wife, Lydia Niebuhr, taught the children.

Henrietta’s mother had come from Germany when she was two; so not only did the family wait for Santa Claus, but they also put out a banana for St. Nicholas on December 5th, St. Nicholas Eve.

One Christmas, Henrietta’s mother made sheets and pillowcases for her daughter’s doll bed, while the woman who sewed for the Knechts made dresses for her doll. Mary Jane, Henrietta’s favorite doll, was “refurbished from head to foot” many times.

Teddy bears, named after Theodore Roosevelt, were new when Henrietta was a child; she remembers that her mother’s cousin sent her one when she was just two years old.

Henrietta’s mother, Katie, started baking her springerle and other Christmas cookies around Thanksgiving. Her family came to her house for Christmas dinner, which always featured goose (cooked the day before so the grease could be skimmed off as it cooled) and a big platter of *geschmelzte* noodles.



Jane Poertner Remembers

When Jane Browne Poertner was a child, setting up the manger scene at home was her responsibility—a responsibility the little girl took very seriously. The *papier-mâché* and ceramic figurines had to be arranged “just so.” Perhaps this year there would be a new shepherd from the dime store to add to the worshippers.

It was the same with the tree. “We spent hours fussing over the lights, getting them just right,” says Jane. Year after year, the tree looked pretty much the same; in fact, Jane still has ornaments that her mother and grandmother hung on it.

Jane’s earliest Christmas memories include watching Spencer Littleton, her father, and a third man stroll down the aisle singing “We Three Kings” at the First United Presbyterian Church Christmas pageant. At the social hour which followed, Santa Claus brought each child a bag of candy and nuts with an apple and an orange—a treat for Jane, since fresh fruit wasn’t available in the winter.

Christmas at school was a bit more complicated. The 50-cent gift exchange at Central School caused “a lot of anxiety” for Jane. What if she drew the name of someone “too fancy,” who didn’t appreciate the handkerchief she had bought at Kresge’s or Woolworth’s?

Jane knew what it was like to receive a gift you weren’t excited about. After all, didn’t Marguarite Berger and her mother give Jane a strange gift every year for her birthday and Christmas? What was a child to do with a sterling silver spoon? And when she had all 8, they started giving her salad forks!

Of course, Jane’s attitude changed by the time she was married and owned a complete set of flatware. Every year, when she uses it at Christmas, she talks about the Bergers and their wonderful gifts.

Jane’s mother always got plenty of presents. After Jane’s father died, she taught kindergarten at Jefferson School for 25 years. Jane remembers helping her mother carefully catalogue all the bottles of perfume given by children whose parents worked at Lehn and Fink.

The day that school let out for Christmas vacation, Jane got out the portable record player, put her 45’s on the automatic record changer, and set it to play while she and her mother celebrated their Christmas. The next morning, they packed up the car and drove to Jane’s grandparents’ home in Chenoa for the holidays.

Today, Jane says Christmas is fun at Community Action, where she has been executive director for 20 years. “People who don’t think to donate at other times of the year open their hearts and their wallets at the holiday,” she says.

Food is given; new toys come from the Channel 20 drive and other organizations; and “it’s always fun to have a new coat at Christmas,” from the members of St. John United Church of Christ.

Employees of the bottle factory bring items packed in glass—specialty foods like pickles, that people

wouldn’t ordinarily have with their Christmas dinners. A sign out in front of the agency says, “Help Yourself” to the leftover trees placed there by Kiwanis members; and they always disappear.

Jane remembers the year a blizzard hit before Christmas; she got out the van and picked up staff members who were snowbound. One woman was “up to her kneecaps in snow,” delivering baskets to needy families.

Roger Boss Remembers

Roger Boss remembers that Christmas Eve day was the biggest day of the year at Boss Drugs, where you could buy everything from toys to kids’ games to cameras to model airplanes to perfume gift sets with oval mirrors.

Boss Drugs was a family operation that over the years involved Marvin Boss, Sr.; his wife, Blanche; his sister, Marguerite Lindenberg; and his two sons, Roger and Marv.

Roger reminds us that the store sold Christmas candy in bulk; he still looks for the old-fashioned ribbon candy when he goes to a candy store.

Roger also remembers that his dad used to cover the fronts of the counters with big boards that held the men’s gift sets. Old Spice especially “sold like hotcakes.”

Boss Drugs sold Christmas decorations, too: ornaments and strings of lights with big bulbs, not the little ones we have today. Roger remembers bubble lights and light strings where “when one went out, the whole shebang went out. We had a bulb tester and used to test strings all the time for people,” he says. Foil tinsel “sold like crazy,” even the thinner, flimsier foil that replaced the old, heavier foil.

Roger remembers gazing at the winter sky, so special because “you could see so far, far away” and wondering whether that’s what it was like the night Jesus was born. ■



Jane Browne Poertner.

Christmas Bells at the Salvation Army

Hear them ring!

"I was an orphan at Christmas when I was a child," claims Joanna Ketcham. "My mother would take me to my grandparents' in Clinton so she could ring bells."

In the early days, most of the kettle workers who rang bells for the Salvation Army were members of the church, including poor people who received songbooks for their bell-ringing and food baskets to help their families. So every year, an anonymous Logan County woman would go into Spurgeon's and buy mittens for all the bell ringers and a coat for one lucky child. Tony Rufogales, the owner of Gem lunchroom, did his part by donating meals.

Joanna says the Kiwanis and Rotary helped ring bells "forever"; by 1957, they were joined by the Lincoln police, Lions club, and American Legion. For many years, organizations who wanted to ring signed up at the annual breakfast at the Army headquarters on Kickapoo Street.

When Captain (later Major) Herbert Caldwell first came to Lincoln, he started the Tree of Lights on the courthouse lawn. Each lighted bulb represented first \$10, then \$15 raised. Joanna, who worked in the office for 11 years while he was here, typed the addresses on the 1000 envelopes for the mail appeal and mapped out the route for the Christmas basket delivery.

Rosemary Zimmerman remembers packing baskets on the stage at the Methodist Church and at Centennial Courts and the year she went to the rec center to recruit high school boys to help deliver baskets. Jerry Dehner and his friends readily agreed, and her son Bobby was glad to work. Her son Tom, however, didn't really want to be associated with the Army.

A proud, reluctant Tom left to deliver baskets; several hours later, a humbled Tom burst through the door and threw himself on his knees by the dining room table. "Mother, can

you forgive me?" he cried. "I didn't know people lived like that." He had delivered a basket to a home with a dirt floor and to kids who were happy just to get apples and oranges. After that, "you didn't have to ask him" to help out the Army.

Not only did young people help deliver baskets, they did their part in stocking them, too. In 1969, when Major Myron Johnson was here, the Cub and Boy Scouts collected between 1,500 and 2,000 cans of food one Saturday in December.

The baskets included everything for Christmas dinner—and then some. All the older people received a small bag of candy, which Joanna says they appreciated more than the whole basket of food. The year Violet Scully was chairman of the food drive, each basket was topped with a fir bough and a red ribbon.

In later years, the Logan County REACT delivered the baskets and made it a game to try to beat their own record. When the total of baskets reached 200, some churches and clubs took names to help out.

No sooner had everyone polished off the last of their basket, than it was time for an anonymous donor to begin knitting mittens and hats for

the next year's Toy Shop in the basement of the Citadel.

She wasn't the only creative one. In 1960, more than 125 dolls were dressed by seventh-grade girls at Lincoln Junior High School. In later years, beautiful dolls were created in the First National Bank of Lincoln (later Magna) Dress-A-Doll contest. After the bank also began providing trucks, parents could come to the Citadel and pick out a pair of mittens, a new doll or truck, and good used toys for their children's Christmas.

Former board member Judy Busby remembers wrapping toys for the prison Toyshop. The Toyshop was a chance for prisoners to send Christmas presents to their children. A "toy shop" was set up at the prison with a sample of each toy available. After picking out a toy for each of his children, an inmate signed a card to be sent with it. The toys were delivered by UPS with no indication that the Army had anything to do with it.

The Salvation Army in Lincoln celebrated its hundredth birthday in 1989. Although relief work continues in Lincoln, the church was closed in 1993; the Citadel burned to the ground in the spring of 1997. ■



Lighting the Salvation Army Tree of Light, Logan County courthouse lawn in 1969. Courtesy of Larry Shroyer Photographic Collection/Lincoln Public Library District.

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I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER THE CHRISTMAS I GOT . . .

A LAPEL WATCH that I admired in a store window—a watch I knew we couldn't afford. When I had finished opening my Christmas presents that year, my husband said, "If I wanted a watch as much as you wanted the one you saw, I would tear down the tree looking for it." It was in the pocket of my new bathrobe. I wear it still. JANE MIER

A CHEMISTRY SET in a bright yellow box that I admired in the window of Thornton's when I was downtown with my dad. The next day, I noticed the set was gone from the window; and I thought, "I won't be getting that." I'll never forget that Christmas, because I did get the chemistry set; and I was surprised. BOB SULLIVAN

A JACKET WITH A CORDUROY COLLAR, instead of the sheepskin collar I had hoped for. We were raising New Zealand red rabbits for food; so we skinned a couple, tanned the hides, and my mom helped me cut them to size and sew them onto the corduroy collar. ALBERT GEHLBACH

AN UMBRELLA that I received when I was 16 or 17. I was disappointed in it as a gift and hated it until I had to walk in the rain from the high school to the business school for classes. Then I learned to love that umbrella. ELOISE PARK

MY HUSBAND, KEN, HOME FROM THE SERVICE Christmas week of 1944. He and my brother Bob Taylor had both been reported missing in action. Both men finally returned home, and that was my best present ever. ROSEMARY ZIMMERMANN

A POUND BOX OF CHRISTMAS CREAMS, all in different shapes: Santa Claus, wreaths, a little boy and girl. Along with an apple and a holy card or statue, that was our gift from Monsignor Henkel at St. Mary's school every year. Children didn't have as many things as they do today; so, "we were all excited." ALMA DONATH TWARDOS

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Inside This Issue

Light, Giving, and Joy!

O Christmas Tree!

Christmas Remembered

Christmas Bells at the
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