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Article Summary: Many Christmas activities and unique holiday customs developed in Omaha, beginning in the 1850s. Beautiful downtown store window displays had disappeared by 1980, but a strong tradition of charitable work has endured for more than a century.

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Photographs / Images: Christmas at the Omaha Home for Boys; Guy R Spencer cartoon "Urgent Call for the First Assistant" (*Omaha World-Herald*, November 14, 1930); Omaha City Mission in 1928; Union Outfitting Company, Sixteenth and Jackson Streets, 1925; Guy R Spencer December calendar page, 1914; souvenir pin for Christmas shoppers at the Boston Store; Christmas decorations on lawn of Omaha courthouse; Sears Roebuck Company bicycles, 1938; Christmas display at J L Brandeis and Sons Firestone Tire Company; Santa Claus and Christmas tree at Father Flanagan's Boys Home in the German American Home, December 23, 1920; Omaha Concord Club members with residents of Minerva Cottage, 1926; Monton Motor Company show window containing a new automobile with the gift tag "Merry Christmas to the Family from Dad"; Christmas window display of the Berg Clothing company (*Omaha World-Herald*, November 26, 1955); Christmas morning on Sixteenth and Farnham Streets (*Omaha World-Herald*, December 26, 1952); Good Fellows donation tree at the State Theater (*Omaha World-Herald*, December 24, 1952); Christmas decorations on the main floor of J L Brandeis and Sons Department Store, 1966; US Marine Corps Reserve "Toys for Tots" barrel, Eighteenth and Harney Streets (*Omaha World-Herald*, December 1, 1958)

SALES, SANTA, AND GOOD FELLOWS: CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IN OMAHA

By Tommy R. Thompson

Omaha was a small city of less than 2,000 people in the 1850s. As the capital of Nebraska Territory and a major outfitting point for gold seekers and freighting firms, the community grew quickly.¹ Yet amid rapid change, Omahans continued traditional Christmas activities and developed unique holiday customs that have survived for more than a century.

In the 1850s and 1860s the Christmas season was a busy and festive time in Omaha. About two weeks before Christmas, local merchants arranged attractive displays of toys and "fancy goods" in their windows and advertised their wares in small newspaper ads.² Many Christmas shoppers found gifts at ladies church bazaars.³

During the last third of the

nineteenth century holiday activities became more elaborate and sophisticated as Omaha grew to be Nebraska's largest city and industrial center. The commercial aspects of Christmas became more pronounced, although merchants generally refrained from advertising holiday wares until after Thanksgiving. Most began holiday advertising the first Sunday after Thanksgiving; a few stores waited until a week or so after that date. Occasionally a merchant opened the Christmas season as early as the middle of November, but such instances were rare.⁴ Newspaper advertisements remained small and plain until the late 1880s, when some stores began using ads that ran one-half page to perhaps a page or more. Ads also became more appealing, with drawings of toys and other merchandise designed to pique the interest of Christmas shoppers.⁵

Merchants tried to draw customers into their stores by other means as well. Customers who purchased a certain number of items or items of a prescribed value would receive a free gift from some merchants.⁶ In the mid 1880s L.O. Jones and Company offered shoppers a "Free Coffee Lunch" all day December 18. The "sale" was also an enticement to cus-

Christmas at the Omaha Home for Boys. Photograph by Louis R. Bostwick.



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tomers. Frugal citizens could wait for the "Xmas Closing Sale," which became fairly common during the four or five days before Christmas. Many parents must have rushed to Hayden Brothers just before Christmas in 1890 to buy a pair of Acme steel runner ice skates for \$.45, regularly priced at \$1.25. Some merchants preferred a post-Christmas sale. One practical businessman advertised his Christmas wares at a twenty percent discount effective December 27 with the suggestion that the merchandise would make

good New Years gifts.⁷ Extended hours were another approach. As early as December 1, merchants notified customers that their stores would remain open evenings until Christmas. The owner of the Boston Store in 1895 announced that his store would be open until eleven p.m. on Christmas Eve, and some stores remained open on Christmas Day.⁸

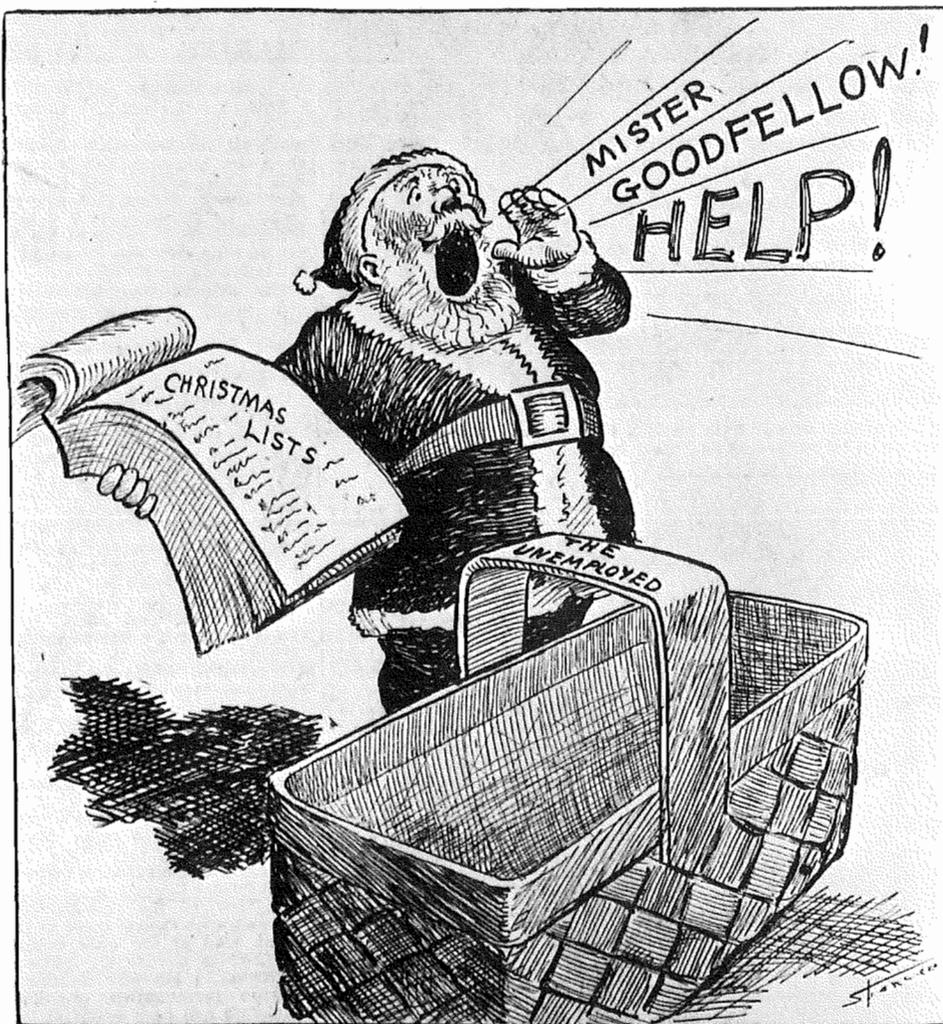
While advertising, sales, and longer hours were effective appeals to customers, merchants also tried to create a festive Christmas spirit by using

elaborate decorations in their establishments. Evergreen garlands and holly were common, but the merchants also focused on the display of their wares. A reporter for the *Omaha Daily Herald* in 1883 wrote that James Bonner's home furnishings store glittered inside like a palace. Glistening crystal, polished silver, delicate china, and other treasures glowed under the light from electric lamps, which had arrived in the city only a few months before.⁹

Even more impressive were the window displays. Merchants competed to arrange the most attractive displays, and shoppers looked forward to these annual holiday scenes, gathering around the windows to await the official unveiling. Then suddenly before them was a winter landscape with Santa Claus in his sleigh; a country scene complete with log cabin, real trees, a pond, and animals playing on cotton snow; or children asleep in bed next to a lovely tree draped with presents. Some stores changed their windows two or three times before Christmas. The advent of electric lighting in the early 1880s made the displays even more fabulous. Tremendous crowds viewed the Christmas windows from morning until night, and many children retained fond memories of them for years.¹⁰

Even the beautiful window displays could not capture the attention of young people like the magical figure of Santa Claus. Gradually Santa became a regular Christmas attraction at Omaha department stores. By the 1880s his arrival marked the opening of the shopping season. Hayden Brothers drew tremendous crowds with an annual Christmas parade, and hundreds of Omaha children lined the streets to watch Santa ride past on a Hayden delivery wagon. Other wagons followed, displaying holiday items from the various departments of the store, although the children probably paid little attention since they were scrambling for the candy thrown by Santa. As the *Omaha World-Herald* noted in 1890, the arrival of Santa at Haydens was always a "dazzling hit."¹¹

"Urgent Call for the First Assistant," by cartoonist Guy R. Spencer (1899-1939), *Omaha World-Herald*, November 14, 1930. The Good Fellows were a service organization sponsored by the World-Herald.



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Between 1900 and 1920 merchants continued the custom of waiting until after Thanksgiving to open the Christmas season. Occasionally a business began its Christmas advertising in mid-November, but most stores stressed Thanksgiving sales during much of the month.¹² Toylands opened and Santa arrived in the stores during the second week of December. For example, J.L. Brandeis and Sons (Boston Store) in its *World-Herald* ad of Sunday, December 3, 1905, urged readers to start their Christmas shopping the following day and announced that the Brandeis toyland would open on December 9.¹³

However, there was a tendency even then to encourage Omahans to do their Christmas shopping somewhat earlier than in the past. The *Omaha Daily News* reported on December 12, 1900, that Christmas shopping had started "early," while a decade later, the *World-Herald* reminded readers on November 20 that thrifty buyers would do their shopping early.¹⁴ In 1911 merchants displayed toys earlier than ever before.¹⁵ The Commercial Club (Chamber of Commerce) in 1912 reported that merchants in some cities were resisting the trend toward beginning the Christmas season in November, but the club felt that an early start would relieve congestion in the stores and insure delivery of Christmas packages in time for the holiday.¹⁶ Newspapers such as the *World-Herald* continued to endorse the concept. In 1917 the *World-Herald* urged readers on November 22 to "Get in line, and be an early Christmas Shopper."¹⁷ This trend toward an earlier beginning of the Christmas season continued in the 1920s and 1930s, and by 1941 the Brandeis Toyland opened on November 22.¹⁸

In the 1920s the perception that Christmas shopping was beginning earlier each year helped provoke some reaction by a few prominent Omaha citizens, although most comments came from religious leaders. Critics stressed the "over commercialization"



Various charitable groups provided Christmas food and gifts to residents of the Omaha City Mission, depicted above in 1928.

of Christmas; to them Christmas had lost its original meaning.¹⁹ The *World-Herald* responded in an editorial that materialism, as exhibited in the purchasing of gifts, really reflected the true Christmas, because "the spirit of Christmas is the spirit of unselfish sacrifice for others."²⁰ In 1930 the Reverend J.W. Kirkpatrick concluded that the commercial aspects of Christmas would continue and it was up to the people to remember the real purpose of the holiday.²¹ By the 1930s there was little evidence of any public concern about Christmas having become too commercialized, probably because merchants continued to refrain from promoting the holiday earlier than the third week in November and because the changes observed during the previous decade had now become more accepted.²²

Techniques used to attract cus-

tomers to the stores were similar to those used in the nineteenth century. The "Half-Price Sale" and "Closing Out Sale" usually occurred two or three days before Christmas, followed by ads starting December 24 or 25 for the "After Christmas Sale," "Year-End Clearance Sale," "Clean Sweep Sale," and eventually the "White Sale." Bargains could be found, especially in toys, if the shopper was willing to wait until the last minute to purchase gifts.²³

Merchants also continued the practice of extending store hours for the convenience of shoppers. From about 1900 until the late 1920s, most Omaha businesses that belonged to the Associated Retailers Association remained open until nine or ten in the evening six days a week starting in mid-December. In the 1930s longer hours became the rule, starting the second



The Union Outfitting Company, Sixteenth and Jackson Streets, was a popular source of Christmas gifts in 1925.

week of the month. During World War II some merchants extended their hours as early as December 1, though the longer hours applied only one or two evenings per week. Stores also tended to remain open until nine p.m. on Christmas Eve.²⁴

Free gifts to attract shoppers was another merchandising method carried over from the past. In 1908 the Peoples Store offered one of the most amazing gifts of the time. Everyone who bought merchandise worth ten dollars or more received a trimmed Christmas tree which included candles, holly, twelve oranges, two pounds of candy, a toy horn, and one fancy toy.²⁵ In 1922 the Union Outfitting Company gave away over fifty items including a child's pedal-powered Pierce Arrow sedan and a Pennsylvania Flyer electric train. A few years later J.L. Brandeis and Sons gave away three children's autos

powered by gasoline engines.²⁶ In a more practical vein, the Union Outfitting Company annually presented a free turkey to each customer who purchased goods of a certain value. By 1937 this tradition had endured for fifty years with the exception of 1927 when the store had a supply of geese instead of turkeys.²⁷

The toy department was still the major attraction for many prospective buyers. Described variously as a "fairyland," a "glittering palace of beauty," or a "paradise for the kiddies," the toy departments became grander year by year. Symbolically, J.L. Brandeis and Sons began the twentieth century with its toyland in the basement and by the 1920s had elevated it to the eighth floor, where there were seventy-five salespersons to serve customers.²⁸ Santa could be found in many toy departments, and

sometimes he did more than listen to children's Christmas wishes. The Santa at Hayden Brothers one Christmas was described as "an expert pianist, a splendid singer, a crack-a-jack on the mandolin and violin."²⁹ In 1907 the Bennett Company had a Teddy Bear Circus, but J.L. Brandeis seemed to do more than any other store. In 1908 the Brandeis toyland offered a "Dolls Ball of All Nations," a moving picture show, and an Auxetophone (phonograph) concert. During the 1920s and 1930s the store featured a circus with ponies and acrobatic dogs.³⁰

Between 1900 and World War II merchants continued to adorn their stores with attractive displays. Besides interior decorations, window displays remained one of the most appealing aspects of Christmas in Omaha. Parents and children eagerly awaited the unveiling of windows to view collections of mechanical nursery story characters or dolls waltzing at a country club. Eventually the Brandeis store decorated all of its front windows along Sixteenth Street in a continuous theme.³¹ By the 1920s there were contests sponsored by the city's newspapers and the Associated Retailers Association to determine the most beautiful animated display. In the first such competition held in 1920, the *Daily News* awarded a silver cup to the winner, J.L. Brandeis and Sons.³²

Some stores placed decorations outside. The Burgess Nash Company often put up as many as twenty-eight trees decorated with about 1,000 red and green lights along Sixteenth and Harney Streets.³³ In 1924 merchants who were members of the Associated Retailers Association began to line streets in the business district with as many as 250 lighted trees.³⁴ The decorating of downtown streets continued until World War II forced its suspension in 1942.³⁵

Merchants continued to use Santa Claus to draw shoppers to their stores. In 1927 Omaha had its first Christmas parade since the 1890s. City high

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school bands marched, and the schools were dismissed early so students could attend. This parade and others ended with the arrival of Santa at his "lodge" on the courthouse lawn, where children could visit at certain hours. These parades drew crowds estimated from 25,000 to 50,000 people and undoubtedly fulfilled the merchants' desire for crowded store aisles.³⁶

In 1913 Omahans could visit a city Christmas tree on the courthouse lawn. *The Omaha Daily News* reported that the tree was an idea copied from New York City. Several thousand people watched as the tree was lighted on Christmas Eve.³⁷ During the next several years the tree was placed in the city auditorium, where candy and fruit were distributed to poor children.³⁸ In 1918 the tree reappeared on the courthouse lawn, but the scheduled "victory sing" around the tree had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of influenza. However, candy, fruit, nuts, and popcorn were delivered to the homes of poor children.³⁹ Festivities at the tree resumed in subsequent years, but after the early 1920s newspapers no longer mentioned a city tree. There was a tree in the Benson section of the city at the intersection of Maple and Military Avenues.⁴⁰

After World War II Omaha merchants continued to inaugurate the holiday season by beginning their advertising during the second and third weeks in November. In the 1970s and 1980s advertising on a limited scale began early in November, but the greatest volume of Christmas ads started late in the month. There seemed to be a tendency after 1970 to move forward the date for the opening of stores' toylands. Most toylands continued to open the middle of November; some began operating by the first week of the month.⁴¹ By 1981 the *World-Herald* noted that a few businesses had installed Christmas displays in October or even September.⁴²

Merchants after 1945 tried to revive the use of decorations to attract customers, a practice largely abandoned

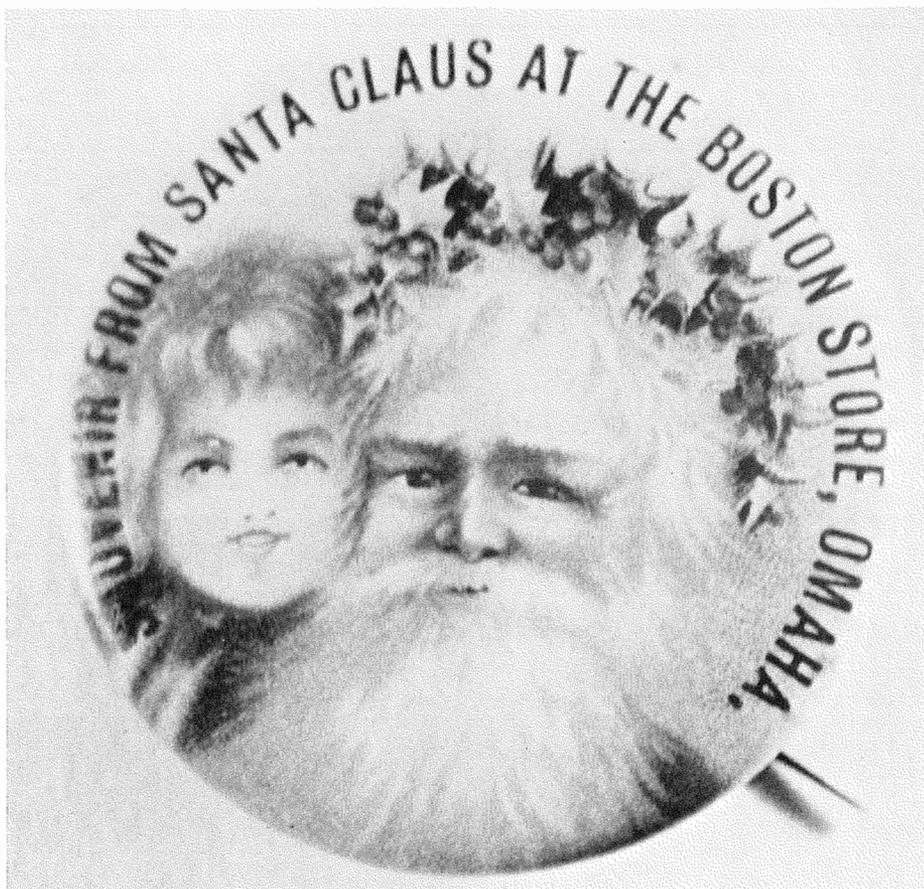


The December page from a 1914 calendar by cartoonist Guy R. Spencer. From the Guy R. Spencer Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

during the war years. Some street decorations appeared again in 1947, and the first lighted displays in postwar Omaha went up in 1949.⁴³ Even though the decorations often were installed a week or so before Thanksgiving, the lights usually were not turned on until the day afterwards.⁴⁴ Occasionally there was a parade with Santa and in 1951 a reported 50,000 people viewed his arrival in Omaha.⁴⁵ The greatest holiday attraction continued to be the old tradition of unveiling the decorated store windows. In 1949 thirty stores participated in "The *World-Herald's* Night of Beautiful Christmas Windows Contest." Until 1972 the Brandeis department store placed a mechanical

display in its main window at Sixteenth and Douglas and used its unveiling to signal the beginning of the Christmas season.⁴⁶

The lengthening of store hours in the postwar era undoubtedly helped revive criticism of the commercial aspects of Christmas. Just after the war stores generally were open only Monday and Thursday evenings for the convenience of shoppers. By the late 1950s they were staying open evenings, Monday through Friday, beginning in early December. In the 1960s some businesses, especially discount and shopping center stores, inaugurated Saturday evening hours. By the mid-1960s, stores crossed the Sunday clos-



A souvenir pin was received by Christmas shoppers at the Boston Store.

ing barrier. Discount stores again led the way by opening on Sunday in late November or early December. A more conservative approach was taken by businesses such as *The Nebraska*, which opened only one Sunday in December. Many Omaha stores soon adopted the policy of opening on Sunday during the Christmas season and then permanently. The Brandeis Corporation claimed that it was "forced" to remain open Sundays because of competition from discount stores. When the stores did begin opening on Sundays for Christmas shopping, they attracted large crowds.⁴⁷

The old concerns about the commercialization of Christmas had resurfaced after World War II, years before Sunday opening had become an issue. In 1947 the Reverend George Bernard of Trinity English Lutheran Church declared that "commercialism is making a mockery out of Christmas." Society, said Reverend Bernard, needed a "true Christmas spirit in these disturbed times."⁴⁸ Many people felt threatened by the Cold War. In 1950 Evelyn Simpson, women's news editor for the *World-Herald*, summed up the fear of "a world where tomorrow is uncertain. . . we must do our

Christmas shopping early, lest tomorrow be Christmas, or Christmas never comes."⁴⁹

Some citizens wrote to the public pulse of the *World-Herald* to complain about early advertising and window decorations and what they considered an over-emphasis on the secular side of Christmas - dances, parties, Santa Claus, Rudolph the reindeer, and Frosty the snowman.⁵⁰ Omaha ministers were drawn into the debate, and they often disagreed with one another. The Very Reverend Robert Hewitt of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral denied that the basic message of Christmas had been lost. He argued that "Christmas will always be to everyone what he puts into it." However, the Reverend R.R. Brown of the Gospel Tabernacle declared that "you cannot substitute Santa Claus for Christ and come up with a spiritual atmosphere." Several other ministers polled by the *World-Herald* agreed with Reverend Hewitt. They felt gift-giving and other activities at Christmas evoked a spirit of kindness among people.⁵¹ The *World-Herald* took a similar stand in several editorials. Shopping for gifts, according to the paper, not only created "a spirit which is good," but it was a basic element of American capitalism. Businessmen did want to make profits at Christmas but so did the manufacturers of hymn books, the *World-Herald* reminded its readers. In 1964 an editorial by Victor Hass answered the critics who were complaining about downtown street decorations being put up in mid-November. Hass declared that the decorations served the purpose of creating a mood for gift buying and were simply part of life.⁵²

Another issue which caused controversy in Omaha after 1945 was the decision to place a creche or nativity scene in front of the courthouse. The creche, erected for the first time in 1955, was purchased by the Associated Retailers Association. At first the only complaints developed because the scene included a white horse instead of



Christmas decorations on lawn of Omaha courthouse. From the Dewell Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



The Sears Roebuck Company suggested bicycles as Christmas gifts during the 1938 holiday season.



Christmas displays at J.L. Brandeis and Sons Firestone Tire Company. From the Dewell Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

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a donkey, which some citizens felt made the display inaccurate.⁵³ Four years later the county board voted to purchase a nativity scene with tax funds. The regional director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews questioned this action, but a *World-Herald* editorial considered the protest to be an overreaction and commented:

Is any unbeliever harmed or weakened in his own faith by taking part in this Christmas celebration? We think not. We think the Moslem, the Jew, the agnostic, or the tribesman in the jungle who permits the spirit of Christmas to come into his heart will be strengthened and purified.⁵⁴

The *World-Herald* did suggest that all other faiths should have their views represented on the courthouse lawn if they desired. The creche appeared at the courthouse every Christmas for the next twenty years, and different organizations continued to protest to no avail. In the late 1970s the creche

was damaged by a windstorm and became unusable. The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1984 that a creche could appear on public property as long as it appeared with other symbols of Christmas such as Santa Claus and Christmas trees.⁵⁵

Downtown parades and magnificent window displays began passing from the Omaha scene by the 1970s as Omahans found suburban malls more attractive for shopping than the downtown area. In 1980 the downtown Brandeis store closed, though many memories remained associated with the building. No longer could children go to the tenth floor to see the "Fairyland Castle," "Duke the Dancing Pony," the Schoonover Dog Act, or "Willy Wonkaland."⁵⁶ Christmas had moved to the malls, but it would never be the same. Shopping center stores generally did not even hire their own

Santas, because it was cheaper to hire one Santa to serve the entire mall area.⁵⁷

Despite the hustle and bustle of Christmas shopping, parades, and family activities, Omahans historically have remembered the needs of the less fortunate members of the community. As early as the Civil War years, churches in the city provided gifts for poor children.⁵⁸ Charity work expanded with the arrival of a small group of Sisters of Mercy nuns on the steamboat *Montana* in the fall of 1864. Soon the sisters were providing dinner and gifts of clothing for the poor on Christmas Day.⁵⁹ By the late 1860s other Omaha women organized a relief society to help poor widows and children during the holidays.⁶⁰ This spirit of sharing was one of the richest and most persistent Christmas traditions established during Omaha's first decades.

Santa Claus and Christmas tree at Father Edward Flanagan's Boys Home in the German American Home, December 23, 1920. From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection owned by KMTV and on permanent loan to the Omaha History Museum, Omaha.





The Omaha Concord Club provided Christmas cheer in 1926 for residents of Minerva Cottage, an institution for homeless girls operated by the National Christian Welfare Union.

The children at the Convent of Mercy Orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy would have had little Christmas cheer if the people had not aided them.⁶¹ Starting in the mid-1870s there were also children at the Omaha City Mission on Tenth Street between Dodge and Capitol, one of the poorest areas in the city. The mission, founded by the Christian Workers Association, was designed at first to provide a weekly dinner for Omaha newsboys and bootblacks. Later it added a Sunday school for poor children in the area and a home where young women could learn to sew. Each year by the late 1880s the mission provided a Christmas dinner and tree with presents for 400 to 500 children.⁶²

One of the major efforts to help Omaha's poor during the holiday season was led by the *Omaha World-Herald*. In 1889 the newspaper asked for donations to a "Poor Children's Christmas Fund." The result was a party for 2,000 children complete with Christmas tree, Santa Claus (who entered in a dog cart drawn by an elephant), and presents for all. In 1890 donations provided Christmas dinner

to nearly 4,000 children, who also consumed over 2,000 pounds of candy. Children of all races and ages attended the dinner and

for an hour all the sordid miseries of life were forgotten. For an hour, all that was sad and sorrowful in life was banished. For an hour, rich and poor, black and white, were happy in the universal kinship of Christmastide.⁶³

The same year volunteers delivered presents and additional food to 700 homes, many of them "miserable shanties" on the bottoms near the Missouri River. Organizers of the festivities felt that ill children and those with insufficient clothing had been unable to attend the party the previous year and had not received a gift. Even though Omahans responded with open hearts to the poor, one of the city commissioners "warned" three non-residents out of town in 1890, because it was believed other communities had been sending their poor to Omaha to take advantage of the city's charitable organizations.⁶⁴

Holiday charitable work during the first decades of the twentieth century became more sophisticated. The Salvation Army and the Volunteers of

America took over from the city mission much of the responsibility for feeding the poor at Christmas. Annually the Army's kettles and the Volunteers's chimneys appeared on Omaha streets seeking donations for food baskets, at least after the Army in 1902 ended the policy of feeding the poor as a group in its hall. Each of these organizations delivered between 200 and 500 food baskets to needy persons at Christmas.⁶⁵ The city mission, Salvation Army, and other groups such as the Junior League in the 1920s and 1930s tried to provide gifts for poor children. They often had a tree and distributed shoes, clothing, candy, and perhaps a toy. One year the city mission included a "letter of encouragement" for the "waifs." In 1910 an estimated 5,000 poor children received gifts. Omaha's newsboys with such nicknames as "Bad Luck," "Skinny," "Smoke," and "Snakes," received from a donor "a live chicken, a peck of potatoes, a quart of cranberries, four packages of Post Toasties and Postem breakfast food, apples, cookies, oranges, coffee, and sugar."⁶⁶ Starting in 1919 or 1920 members of the police department provided Christmas festivities for some of the poorest children in the city, those living in the third ward bounded by the Missouri River and Leavenworth, Sixteenth, and Nicholas Streets. One newspaper described these children as representing every race, creed, and color.⁶⁷

Other charitable or civic organizations looked after children living in Omaha orphanages. The Knights of Columbus, Woodmen of the World, Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Catholic Daughters of America, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Masonic orders were just a few of the many groups that helped provide Christmas for children at the St. James Orphanage, Creche, Social Settlement House, Child Saving Institute, and others. Businesses like J.L. Brandeis and Sons, Hayden Brothers, and Sears, Roebuck and Company often donated toys.⁶⁸ Annually in the 1920s T.A. Tully of Tully's Hat Store dis-

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tributed at least 100 hats to needy men.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most systematic charitable work was carried on by the Omaha newspapers. In 1908 the *Omaha Daily News* started the Santa Claus Association. Over the next fifteen years the *News* provided a gift, candy, and fruit for 1,500 to 3,000 children annually. Private donations supported the Association, and expenditures ranged from only \$716 in 1913 to \$2,567 in 1920.⁷⁰ Eventually overshadowing the *Daily News* work was the Good Fellows campaign started by the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1910. That newspaper adopted the idea from the *Chicago Tribune*. Readers were encouraged to buy gifts for children, whose names would be supplied by the paper, or send money directly to the *World-Herald*, which would purchase the presents. The first year the Good Fellows helped about 900 children.⁷¹ Within a decade the campaign was aiding approximately 2,000 children annually and spending from \$1,500 to

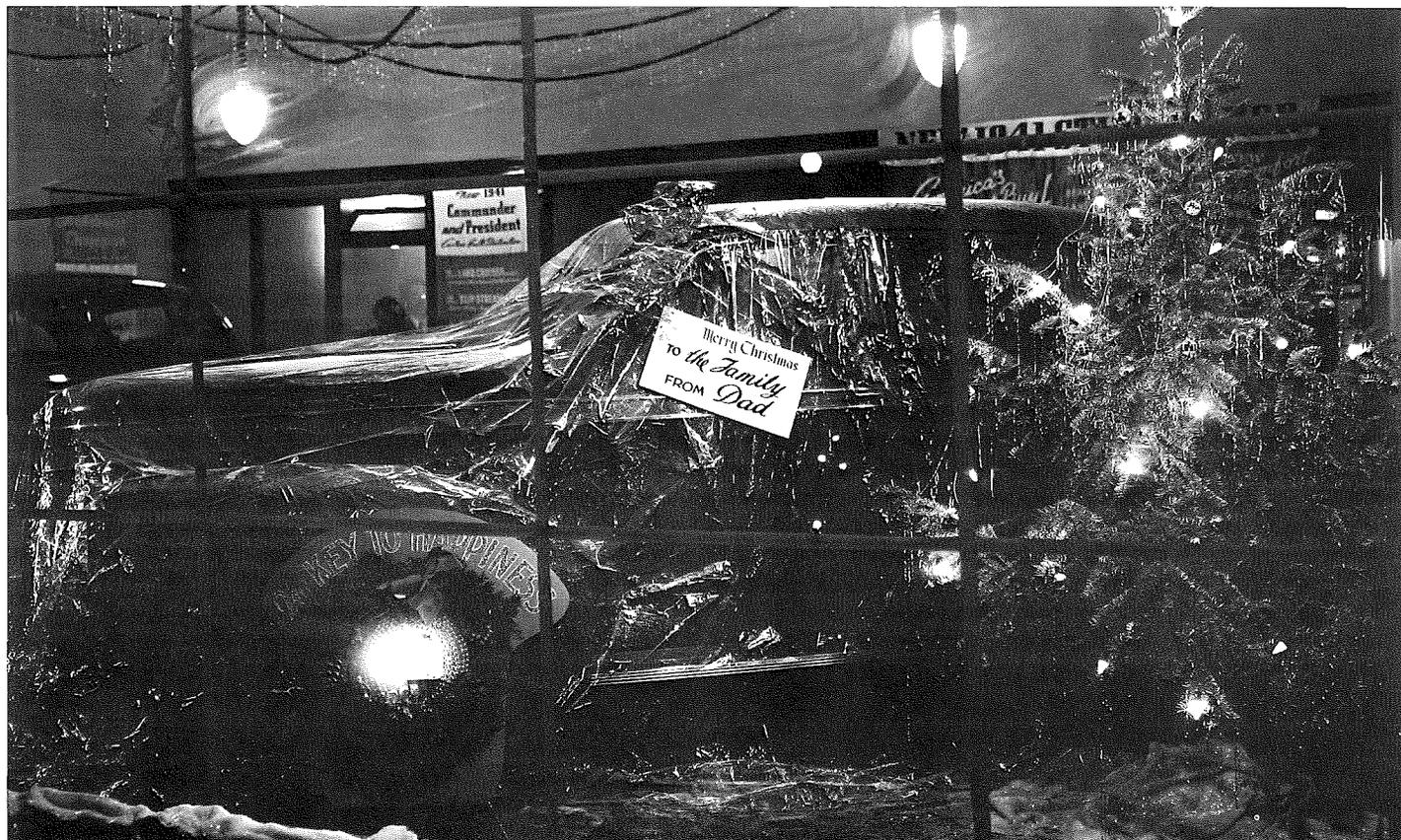
\$2,000 in direct donations. The campaign grew in the 1920s, and at one time 4,000 children received aid.⁷² Though the depression caused donations to decline in the early 1930s, the program had recovered by 1939. In that year Good Fellows contributed over \$7,000, which the *World-Herald* used to purchase gifts and food baskets for 2,502 families. Gradually the focus of the Good Fellows drive shifted from direct involvement by contributors, and the *World-Herald* assumed a greater role as chief Good Fellow, calling upon readers to furnish the money and "He'll Do the Job."⁷³

After World War II charitable groups continued to fulfill their traditional roles. Members of the Y-Teens, Girl Scouts, and Camp Fire Girls often dressed dolls for the Good Fellow campaign; the Catholic Daughters of America provided toys for the St. James Orphanage; and the Marine Corps Reserve started its "Toys for Tots" drive in the mid-1950s.⁷⁴ Major contributions continued to be made by

the *World-Herald* Good Fellows and by the Salvation Army. In 1945 the Good Fellows drive raised \$6,777, and by the early 1980s fund raising topped \$100,000.⁷⁵ Similarly the Salvation Army began its "Tree of Lights" campaign in 1950, when it erected a thirty-foot tree at the courthouse. The goal was to raise \$25,000 and turn on a light for each \$100 collected. Thirty years later the Army sought \$250,000 and collected almost \$275,000.⁷⁶ Both the Salvation Army and the Good Fellows used their funds over the years to provide toys, clothing, Christmas parties, food, summer camp, glasses, and hearing aides for needy children.⁷⁷ Though the fund-raising took place during the Christmas season, the benefits were realized throughout the year.

What has Christmas meant to the people of Omaha over the last 130 years? For some its magic has been tarnished. Only older residents can remember the beauty of downtown store window displays, and critics of commercialism complain about the

The Monton Motor Company of Omaha suggested a new automobile as a Christmas gift from Dad to the family. From the Dewell Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.





Christmas window display of the Berg Clothing Company, Omaha World-Herald, November 26, 1955.



Christmas morning on Sixteenth and Farnam Streets, Omaha World-Herald, December 26, 1952.

apparent de-emphasis of the holiday's religious character. But continuity has been more important than change. Strong traditions such as charitable work have continued for more than a century. The celebration of both religious and secular aspects of Christmas continues to play a major role in the life of Omaha.

NOTES

¹Lawrence Larsen and Barbara Cottrell, *The Gate City: a History of Omaha* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Company, 1982), 15, 36-37.

²*The Omaha Nebraskian* (Weekly), December 25, 1863, 3; *The Omaha Daily Herald*, Morning (DH), December 12, 1869, 4n.p.; December 25, 1869, 1, 3, 4.

³*The Omaha Daily Republican*, December 18, 1868, 1.

⁴Examples of ads: DH, December 4, 1873, 4n.p. (Variety Bazar); November 22, 1882, 1 (A. Cruickshank and Co.); November 24, 1883, 4n.p. (Range); December 9, 1883, 8n.p. (Garrabrant and Cole); November 21, 1886, 6 (Kahn Bros' China Palace); *Omaha World Herald*, Morning (MWH), November 16, 1890, 9 (N.B. Falconer); *Omaha World Herald*, Evening (EWH), December 1, 1893, 5 (Morse Dry Goods).

⁵EWH, December 13, 1895, 9 (Boston Store).

⁶Although wide-spread evidence of this practice was not found in the newspapers, some stores that did use the method at least once were The Boston Cash Dry Goods Store, L.O. Jones and Co., and Larkin and Co. DH, December 16, 1880, 8; December 17, 1886, 6n.p.; December 1, 1887, 2.

⁷Examples of sale ads: DH, December 24, 1873, 4n.p. (Variety Bazar); December 26, 1880, 1 (A. Cruickshank and Co.); December 20, 1883, 8 n.p. (Max Meyer and Co.); MWH, December 21, 1890, 9 (N.B. Falconer); December 23, 1890, 8 (Hayden Brothers); EWH, December 23, 1895, 8 (The Boston Store).

⁸DH, December 19, 1880, 8 (Max Meyer and Bro.); December 25, 1880, 8 (99 Cent Store); December 25, 1886, 8 (Gibson, Miller and Richardson); December 1, 1887, 2 (C.S. Raymond); MWH, December 15, 1889, 3 (Kelley, Stiger and Co.); EWH, December 22, 1890, 8 (Hayden Brothers); December 23, 1895, 8 (The Boston Store).

⁹DH, December 23, 1883, 8.

¹⁰DH, December 19, 1882, 8; December 6, 1883, 8n.p.; *The Omaha Excelsior*, December 20, 1884, 3n.p.; EWH, December 18, 1890, 8; December 20, 1895, 9.

¹¹DH, December 21, 1873, 4n.p.; December 17, 1886, 6n.p.; EWH, December 5, 1890, 8; December 12, 1893, 8; December 9, 1895, 8; December 18, 1895, 3.

¹²For examples of early Christmas advertising see MWH, November 18, 1900, 12 (T.L. Combs and Co.); November 20, 1910, 6 (Milton Rogers and Sons Co.); more typical ads were December 2, 1900, 8 (Hardy's "The 99 Cent Store"); December 7, 1902, 5 (Brandeis "Boston Store" and Sons); December 4, 1910, 3W (Orchard and Wilhelm). Thanksgiving sale ads were found

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every November. For these see: MWH, November 25, 1900, 5 (Boston Store, J.L. Brandeis and Sons); November 26, 1905, 25 (Hayden's).

¹³MWH, December 3, 1905, 7.

¹⁴*The Omaha Daily News*, Last or Home Edition (DN), December 12, 1900; MWH, November 20, 1910, 6E.

¹⁵MWH, December 3, 1911, 5N.

¹⁶*Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 22 (November 23, 1912).

¹⁷MWH, November 22, 1917, 7.

¹⁸MWH, November 21, 1941, 5.

¹⁹MWH, December 18, 1923, 3; December 19, 1923, 8; December 25, 1925, 1, 5.

²⁰MWH, December 21, 1923, 14.

²¹MWH, December 23, 1930, 7.

²²For examples of ads in the 1920s and 1930s see MWH, November 21, 1920, 9N (Union Outfitting Co.); November 23, 1920, 5 (J.L. Brandeis and Sons); November 22, 1923, 7 (Burgess-Nash Co.); November 15, 1925, 17 (Nebraska Power Co.); November 16, 1930, 10A (Royal Jewelry Co.); November 21, 1939, 4 (Herzbergs).

²³Sale ads in this era were quite similar. See MWH, December 24, 1905, 12 (Hayden Bros.); December 29, 1910, 12 (J.L. Brandeis and Sons); December 23, 1917, 7 (Burgess-Nash Co.); December 25, 1925, 7 (Goldstein-Chapman Co.); December 25, 1935, 3 (The Nebraska Clothing Co.); December 25, 1939, 13 (Thomas Kilpatrick Co.); DN, December 22, 1920, 9 (Union Outfitting Co.).

²⁴EWH, December 16, 1908, 14 (J.L. Brandeis); MWH, December 18, 1910, 1E (Hayden Bros.); December 17, 1917, 1; December 17, 1922; 15N (Union Outfitting Co.); December 24, 1927, 5 (J.L. Brandeis); December 23, 1935, 5 (J.L. Brandeis); December 11, 1937, 1; November 1, 1942, 1; December 1, 1943, 8.

²⁵EWH, December 11, 1908, 4.

²⁶MWH, December 3, 1922, 8W; December 4, 1925, 5.

²⁷MWH, December 22, 1923, 11; December 3, 1927, 11; December 19, 1937, 7A.

²⁸MWH, December 7, 1902, 5; November 27, 1923, 5; December 4, 1925, 5; DN, December 8, 1907, 5C.

²⁹MWH, December 13, 1910, 5.

³⁰DN, December 1, 1907, 8D; EWH, December 7, 1908, 12; MWH, November 28, 1920, 5N; December 14, 1935, 6; November 25, 1939, 4.

³¹MWH, December 7, 1902, 10; December 7, 1910, 2; December 11, 1910, 5E. For personal reaction to the window displays see Margaret P. Killian, *Born Rich: A Historical Book of Omaha* (Assistance League of Omaha: Omaha, 1978), 118-19.

³²DN, December 14, 1920, 4; December 27, 1920, 1; MWH, December 1, 1937, 14; Killian, 118.

³³MWH, December 11, 1918, 3; December 12, 1920, 6; December 17, 1922, 9w.

³⁴*Omaha Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 16 (December 4, 1926), 8; Vol. 16, No. 17 (December 17, 1927), 7; Vol. 17, No. 17 (December 15, 1928), 6.

³⁵EWH, November 10, 1948, 12.

³⁶MWH, December 4, 1926, 1; December 4, 1927, 1, 16W; December 6, 1927, 1; December 3, 1933, 11A.

³⁷DN, November 30, 1913, 1; December 25, 1913, 1.

³⁸MWH, December 1, 1915, 3; December 21, 1917, 6.



The Good Fellows donation tree at the State Theater, Omaha World-Herald, December 24, 1952.

³⁹MWH, December 22, 1918, 10N; December 24, 1918, 7.

⁴⁰MWH, December 21, 1922, 13; December 19, 1925, 20.

⁴¹MWH, November 9, 1952, 8A, 9A, 4H (J.L. Brandeis and Sons); November 16, 1952, 7A (Union Outfitting Company); November 18, 1960, 42, 43 (Santa's arrival); November 19, 1965, 13 (J.L. Brandeis and Sons); November 5, 1975, 72 (Woolworth); November 3, 1985, 5A and ad supplement (Brandeis, Richman-Gordman); November 10, 1985, 8A, 9A, and ad supplement (Ben Simons, Shopko); November 28, 1985, ad supplement (Sears)

⁴²MWH, December 25, 1981, 54.

⁴³EWH, November 18, 1947, 1; MWH, November 22, 1949, 5.

⁴⁴MWH, November 24, 1956, 4; November 17, 1960, 1; November 28, 1964, 1; November 28, 1970, 13; November 23, 1982, 1.

⁴⁵MWH, November 29, 1949, 1; November 28, 1950, 8; November 24, 1955, 1; EWH, November 3, 1951, 2; November 23, 1957, 8.

⁴⁶EWH, November 18, 1949, 1; MWH, November 26, 1955, 1, 20; November 23, 1958, 5B. Norm Baker, a Visual Merchandise employee of Brandeis during some of these years, supplied information regarding that store. Norm Baker to author, June 1986.

⁴⁷MWH, November 26, 1950, 1; December 7, 1958, 5A; December 1, 1962, 26 (Sears); December 14, 1962, 18 (GEM); December 16, 1965, 19

(International Super Stores); December 3, 1967, 16B (GEM); December 16, 1967, 3 (Gulf Mart, The Nebraska); December 18, 1967, 1; *Women's Wear Daily*, August 27, 1968.

⁴⁸MWH, December 3, 1947, 10.

⁴⁹MWH, December 3, 1950, 9E.

⁵⁰MWH, November 16, 1952, 2F; November 16, 1954, 28; December 11, 1955, 6F; December 25, 1980, 26.

⁵¹EWH, December 21, 1957, 4; December 8, 1962, 10.

⁵²MWH, December 25, 1953, 20; December 25, 1956, 46; November 13, 1964, 38; EWH, December 24, 1954, 6.

⁵³MWH, November 13, 1955, 2B; November 27, 1955, 10B.

⁵⁴EWH, November 23, 1959, 8; December 8, 1959, 17; MWH, December 27, 1959, 4F.

⁵⁵EWH, December 9, 1969, 20; MWH, December 31, 1978, 6B; December 11, 1980, 8; *Lynch V. Donnelly*, *N.Y. Times*, March 6, 1984, 1A, 7B.

⁵⁶Brandeis had programs of this nature throughout this era except for the years of approximately 1966-67. MWH, December 3, 1947, 5; December 5, 1952, 6; EWH, November 21, 1978, 6; November 20, 1979, 6.

⁵⁷MWH, November 27, 1977, 10B.

⁵⁸*The Omaha Nebraskian* (Weekly), December 25, 1863, 3.

⁵⁹"100 Years of Mercy Unto Generations," *The True Voice*, Omaha, October 18, 1963, Section 2.



Christmas decorations on the main floor of the J.L. Brandeis and Sons Department store, 1966. Courtesy of Norman E. Baker.

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⁶⁰*The Omaha Daily Republican*, December 18, 1868, 1.

⁶¹DH, December 23, 1875, 4; December 24, 1882, 8.

⁶²DH, December 28, 1875, 4; December 7, 1880, 8; December 27, 1882, 8; December 21, 1887, 7; *Omaha Excelsior*, December 29, 1888, 5; EWH, December 11, 1889, 1, 2; December 17, 1895, 6.

⁶³EWH, December 8, 1889, 4; December 23, 1889, 4; December 26, 1889, 2; December 2, 1890, 8; December 4, 1890, 8; December 18, 1890, 8; December 24, 1890, 1; December 26, 1890, 5; *Omaha Excelsior*, December 28, 1890, 8n.p.

⁶⁴EWH, December 6, 1890, 1.

⁶⁵DN, December 21, 1900, 8; EWH, December 24, 1908, 1; MWH, December 25, 1902, 8; December 13, 1911, 3; December 19, 1922, 6; December 27, 1925, 13N.

⁶⁶DN, December 24, 1907, 1; MWH, December 25, 1902, 8; December 25, 1910, 1, 7; December 28, 1911, 12; December 21, 1919, 3N, 1E; December 24, 1933, 10A.

⁶⁷MWH, December 22, 1920, 1; December 25, 1925, 1, 3.

⁶⁸MWH, December 27, 1911, 6; December 24, 1937, 1.

⁶⁹MWH, December 27, 1927, 2.

⁷⁰DN, December 5, 1908, 1; December 25, 1913, 1; December 25, 1920, 1, 3.

⁷¹MWH, December 8, 1910, 1, 6, 7; December 1, 1911, 1.

⁷²MWH, December 25, 1918, 1, 2; December 26, 1920, 1; December 25, 1927, 1, 3.

⁷³MWH, December 24, 1933, 1A, 6A; December 28, 1939, 1; December 17, 1943, 1.

⁷⁴EWH, December 7, 1945, 1; MWH, December 11, 1925, 1; December 18, 1960, 11E; December 3, 1965, 8; December 7, 1965, 8.

⁷⁵MWH, December 25, 1945, 1, 3; December 21, 1982, 1.

⁷⁶MWH, December 2, 1950, 2; November 20, 1982, 18; December 25, 1982, 1, 12.

⁷⁷MWH, December 6, 1980, 17; November 21, 1982, 1B.



U.S. Marine Corps Reserve "Toys for Tots" barrel, Eighteenth and Harney Streets, Omaha World-Herald, December 1, 1958.