

Generations

Celebrating the Christmas holidays Victorian style

By now, all generations have had the pleasure of enjoying some version of the movie "A Christmas Carol," written by Charles Dickens, or enjoying the timeless classic in DVD format.

My favorite version is the old 1951 black-and-white with Alastair Sim playing Scrooge. As a kid, the first two ghosts that visited our favorite miser were okay, but the last one, the one dressed in black in the graveyard, never failed to capture my attention and produce goosebumps.

I remember one Christmas in New York when my brother George decided to chuck the usual fixings for family dinner and dive back into Victorian time by preparing a goose complete with chestnut stuffing and plum pudding. It was so much work, but it's one dinner and one Christmas memory that I'll never forget. We still reminisce about it even today when we get together.

So, it got me thinking about other Victorian customs that might bring the spirit of old-time Christmas back to this fast-moving, endless-social-media-chatter generation.

An article by Sarah Crowe on www.bestlifeonline.com pointed me in the right direction.

Some of you still do it today, but No. 1 on her list was to go Christmas caroling. In Dickens' day, caroling was performed not only to bring good cheer to your neighbors, but to get something from them as well, such as alcohol, food or a little cash.

The practice, known as wassailing, is even mentioned in one of our most popular carols. "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." Carolers clamor for "figgy pudding" and threaten



Peg DeMarco

not to leave until they get some. It might be wise today, however, to exit quickly if your neighbor turns off the outside lights and slams the door since the last memory you want to preserve is the approaching flashing light of a patrol car.

No. 2 was to brew up some wassail to offer the carolers. Now, this boomer from New York had to look up the meaning of wassail because I had never heard of it, least of all thought about brewing it up. It's mulled wine, and carolers in Dickens' day carried steins to have a good supply of their wassail.

Christmas cards began to gain popularity in Dickens' era, but they didn't resemble the holiday greetings of today with Santa, bells, wreaths, family photos and

such. Instead of sending any of that, Victorian-era Christmas cards were frequently adorned with images of animals and often included frogs. While the exact reasoning behind frog-themed cards is puzzling, a frog on any Christmas card today is sure to stand out when the envelope is opened.

Today, stockings hung by the fireplace are filled with candy, toys, dog bones, toys with bells for cats, and gift cards. During Dickens' time, fruit was the norm for stocking stuffers, especially oranges, which were considered a luxury due to how far they had to travel to get to the U.K. In reality, however, my granddaughter may not see the point of why her stocking is filled with oranges rather than

the usual candy canes, so I'll have to pass on that one.

Prince Albert brought the tradition of decorating a Christmas tree to the U.K. from his native Germany, but candles were used as decorations — not very safe for any generation.

The poorer folks used dyed goose feathers hung on wires to construct their trees, which was economical as well since a goose was the standard dinner fare. And it's hard to believe since they are expensive in most parts of America today, but the poorest folks during that era cooked oysters for their holiday dinner.

And no meal was complete during that time than a well-made mince pie. If you go into a British

bakery today and ask for a mincemeat pie, you'll typically get a pastry filled with dried fruits, like apples, orange peels, currants and raisins, as well as spices, and maybe a bit of brandy. However, not so during Dickensian times, when mincemeat pies contained actual meat, as their name would suggest, and consisted of a mixture of beef and suet (the fat cut away from the kidneys of cows and sheep) — in addition to the sweeter ingredients associated with the pies today.

So, whatever your pleasure, whether it be to

try your hand at a good, old-fashioned Victorian meal complete with goose, chestnut stuffing, homemade cranberry sauce, home-baked bread and a platter of mincemeat pies, or make a dinner reservation at your favorite family restaurant for Christmas dinner, please join hands before anyone lifts his or her fork to thank God for all the blessings we have in our world today.

Merry Christmas.

Peg DeMarco is a Morganton resident who writes a weekly features column for The News Herald. Contact her at pegdemarco@earthlink.net.

Merry Christmas
Everyone!

