

ISCHUA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS

In 1837 a nineteen year old girl named Victoria became the Queen of England and ruled until her death in 1901. This period of time has become known as the Victorian Era. The word Victorian is used to describe the culture, clothes, furniture and type of architecture known as Queen Anne.

In 1895 Simeon Robbins built a home in the Village of Franklinville known as the Miner's Cabin. Today it is the home of the Ischua Valley Historical Society at 9 Pine Street. Robbins made his fortune mining gold in Alaska. His house was an example of Queen Anne architecture. This type of house usually had two or three stories. There were front porches with wooden railings, ornate woodwork, peaks, towers, bay windows and at least three colors of paint on the house exterior, pillars and trim. The Robbins's home also contained a ballroom on the third floor. With the exception of Dr. Day's Queen Anne Victorian home at 1 Chestnut Street, the majority of the homes built during this era would not qualify as Queen Anne style.

The Robbins were wealthy and could afford servants, expensive furniture and elaborate entertaining. Christmas for them would include balls and parties. However, the families in the Village of Franklinville would celebrate this time of the year on a smaller scale.

During the nineteenth century many homes would be decorated with fresh evergreens. Glass-blown ornaments were very expensive, but families would be able to trim their trees with home-made ornaments, bows, beads, apples, popcorn and cranberry chains, paper chains and corn of copias. The top of the tree usually held a star or angel. Instead of electric lights, candles were used.

Nutcrackers became popular when Tchaikovsky wrote "The Nutcracker Suite" in 1892. In 1875 Christmas cards were first mass produced and it became affordable for people to exchange greetings with family, friends and neighbors. Midnight church services became popular. Sounds of caroling filled the air during this season.

Families adopted various traditions such as reading "A Visit From Saint Nicholas" or the Christmas story from the Bible. Children hung stockings from the fireplace and eagerly awaited a visit from St. Nick. Among early stocking stuffers were small toys, candy, nuts, and oranges. Children who misbehaved sometimes found lumps of coal or switches.

Children also dreamed of larger gifts. The most popular items in the nineteenth century included tool chests, a rolling hoop, an outdoor playhouse, a doll house and furnishings, dolls and buggies and walking animals such as a rooster or elephant. They also hoped for musical instruments, a wagon, sleigh, carved wooden animals, a cup and ball toy, ice skates, books, alphabet blocks, marbles, tops, toy soldiers, rocking horses, bows and arrows, and tea sets.

Everyone looked forward to the huge Christmas dinner. In 1890, "Godey's Lady's Magazine" printed this Christmas menu: raw oysters, bouillon, sweetbread pates, sauce tartare, potatoes a la Maitre d'Hotel, peas, roast turkey, cranberry sauce, Roman punch, quail with truffles, rice croquettes, Parisian salad, crackers and cheese, nesselrode pudding, fancy cakes, fruit and coffee. Roast goose and plum pudding were other favorites.

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The holiday was also a time to visit family and friends. They would listen to music from a piano, player piano, organ or music box. They played games, cards, and enjoyed viewing stereoscopes. If the weather cooperated sleighing, skating and sledding provided great fun.

Hopefully this has given you a glimpse into how Christmas was celebrated early in the twentieth century.

Maggie Fredrickson
Curator of The Miner's Cabin