

Holiday Open House



Urbandale Historical Society
December 4, 2022

The Night Before CHRISTMAS



It was the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring not even a mouse. And so it began, the enchanting poem by Clement Clarke Moore, written as a special Christmas gift for his two daughters, Charity and Margaret, in 1822.

Historical Society President Norm Huitt, longtime collector of antique toys and the sweet smiles they inspire, knew the story well when he gave that wonderful "Night Before Christmas" program at the Olmsted-Urban House on the 8th of December.

It was an endearing tale about a generous gift-giver who resides in a cozy cottage at the top of the world. And on one very special December night, in a reindeer-drawn sleigh, that magical gift-giver shares the lovingly made treasures from his equally magical workshop, to bring an extra measure of joy to the little ones, in every corner of the world, at Christmastime.

The enchanting scene above with the child anxiously waiting for Santa, captures the joy, the wonder and the excitement of that jolly elf's much longed

for visit. But as I sit here by this breakfast room window, watching snow-flakes dance in the wind and actually reciting, at a whisper, each line of Moore's beloved poem, I find myself wondering if this tale is really meant only for children after all.

Both the verses and that merry picture below capture the true meaning of the poem itself . . . a joyful heart and the delight of being fondly remembered with a little extra love! This jubilant scene is truly magical and I'm sure all of us can almost hear the laughter rolling right off the page!

For visitor Colette Hayward came to our "Grandma's House" to celebrate the season, and found herself snuggling up to and being snuggled by a warm-hearted St. Nick who, with that jaunty looking Cinnamon Bear, shared with her a special brand of love and hugs that delightful afternoon!



Colette's daughter-in-law is happily enjoying this wonderful moment too! For like the rest of us, she also has come to know that Santa, or the delightful poem about him, isn't just for children alone. There was joy and love in the writing of it long ago, and even more today in the sharing of love, good will and a happy heart that this magical tale and the gift-giver himself will always inspire!

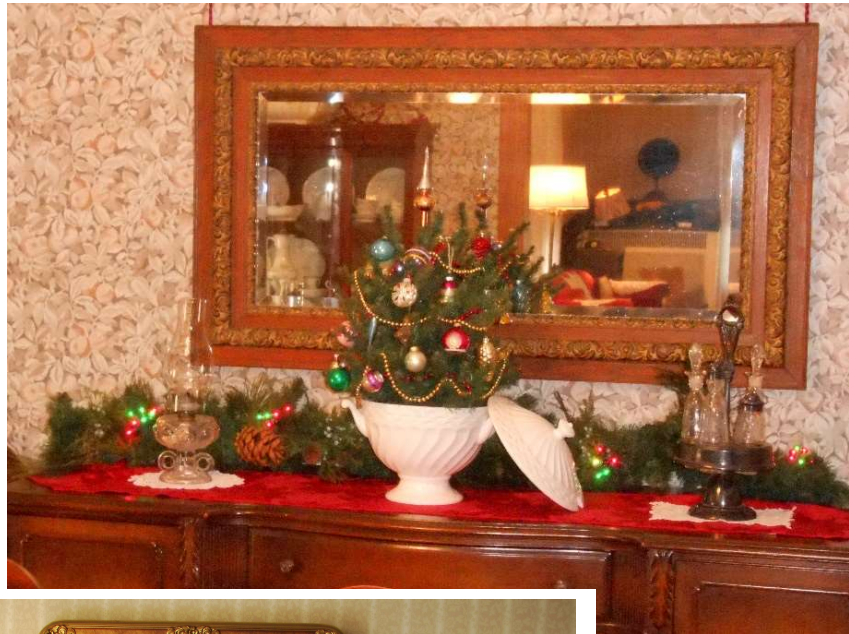


Such was the scene at the Olmsted -Urban House when after leaving pandemic hibernation behind, the Urbandale Historical Society once again celebrated the holidays there on the first Sunday in December.

Each and every room in what we affectionately call “Grandma’s House” was touched with the spirit of Christmas, for it was quite evident that Santa’s “elves” had been there.

They may not have looked anything like St. Nick’s loyal workforce, since none wore the traditional pointy shoes with upturned toes or had tiny sleighbells merrily jingling at the end of whimsical-looking stocking caps. But they were enthusiastic “elves” nonetheless, scampering about, creating the bright and the beautiful with a heart-full of Christmas spirit!

They hung festive little wreaths at the windows and greens in cozy corners. Tiny evergreens stood here and there, some with delicate vintage glass ornaments decorating the branches, and enchanting song books of Old Time Christmas Carols, were placed within easy reach on the pump organ and on the piano.





They arranged holiday blocks to spell NOEL and added pine cones and little sleighs to a side table in the parlor. Another “elfin touch” was a tiny chapel standing in the shade of a miniature evergreen tree.





Christmas without Dickens would be like a kiss without a squeeze! I do believe we had both Dickens and perhaps a squeeze or two at "Grandma's House" that merry afternoon! For standing on the shelf of this pine decorated ball tree, is the figure of Bob Cratchett himself. In his arms is a dear Tiny Tim sharing the look of childhood innocence and hope for the future, through the kindness of others who care.



Playthings of yesteryear were set out and about too, unique to the modern day child but not unfamiliar to these "Christmas elves"! Most were "toys of imagination" and the only mechanical aspect of many with movable parts, was but a pull-string and a little one's happy dreams!

Cowboys and Indians waited their turn to ride little plastic horses and a miniature piano inspired a future musician to coax a tune from the tiniest keys.



A Victrola was among the vintage toys, with a turning handle to produce voice and music, also a tiny tabletop sewing machine to sew a dolly's pretty dresses. And for the budding school teacher there was even a large standing chalkboard to practice penmanship and numbers.

Under the window stood a beautiful dollhouse, with elfin-size furniture and an elfin-size family, and nearby a push sled for a little one's merry afternoon in the snow.



View-Master Reels were set out too which once brought the excitement of far-away places to the littlest armchair traveler, and shelves of exciting story books introduced thoughts and ideas and unbelievable adventures.

Yes, these were the "toys of imagination and dreams" all set 'round and about a popcorn trimmed evergreen in the Children's Room at "Grandma's House".



Also, still upstairs, those "Christmas elves" had been busy! Holiday wreaths at the sewing room windows, were unfortunately bidden in these pictures, but lovely vintage frocks were on display. These were worn on special occasions in decades past, possibly even to celebrate the holidays.



Some garments, for a Christmas gathering, may have been made in this very room, or perhaps even angel wings, for a children's pageant, could once have been fashioned on this old treadle sewing machine.

And then there were long kid gloves and warm cloche hats to frame a pretty face, helping to keep a young lady toasty on her way to a Christmas get-together many long years ago.



There might even have been a warm woolen coat once tucked away in that closet, with fur collar and cuffs to guard against the chill of a particularly frigid Christmas Eve. A walk through this room may bring merry celebrations to life again!



Vergie Riekenberg - 1927



We can plainly see that "Santa's elves" were also here, with wreaths and ribbons and like the Children's Room across the hall, they even brought a little Christmas tree!

It stands hiding another festive window wreath unfortunately, but the tree itself adds a special holiday touch to the bedroom, with long red roping and dainty white hand-crocheted ornaments that are decorating the branches.

Quilts at the foot of the bed, would add color and a degree of warmth on a cold winter's night.

The spinning wheel and yarn winder from an earlier era, were thoughtfully donated, and bring back memories of other Christmases and other treasures homemade in more humble surroundings.



A heavy sleigh blanket is folded inside the trunk against the wall, just waiting for its moment of glory in providing holiday revelers a warm and cozy ride over the snow. It even has pockets for frosty fingers! Once back home, no doubt this happy sleighing adventure was shared through Christmas cards, addressed at a writing desk such as the handsome desk in the picture below.





Yes, those “elves” have been busy, upstairs and down! But their real pride and joy stood in a charming alcove in the front parlor – a truly magnificent Christmas tree that would make even Santa and Mrs. Claus stand back with a loving smile of approval!

Delicate antique glass ornaments hung from the branches and sparkled now and again in the glow of the soft multi-colored bulbs surrounding them. There were bells and figures, some with pictures painted on, and fragile glass balls that looked as though they might have been fashioned out of silver. What a sight to behold! And at the top of the tree, a beautiful angel looked

down upon the scene, causing us to wonder what this heavenly messenger might really have looked like on that very first Christmas Eve.

In this special corner of "Grandma's House" the elves did themselves proud, or perhaps it may have been just "one particular elf" who put his whole heart into creating a magical Christmases morning! For beneath the wide branches of that joyous Tannenbaum was a fantastic world of make-believe.

Miniature trucks with the tiniest wheels were ready to roll, as was a streamlined race car, along with one horse-drawn wagon and a 2-wheel cart, all awaiting word from their drivers while standing within a double set of child-size railroad tracks that entirely circled the base of the tree.

Instead of the usual train engine and boxcars that you would normally expect to see there, wonderful Old Time streetcars were present instead. I counted 4 of them – miniature versions of the kind I remember actually riding in myself when I was just a little girl!





A WONDERLAND OF TOYS

**WHAT LITTLE FOLKS' DREAMS
ARE MADE OF!**

(From the Norm Huitt Collection)

As if that wonderful scene beneath the branches of the Christmas tree was not enough to fill the eyes and imagination and heart of the little boy or girl in all of us, there was also a table full of dreams beside the stairway. More cars and toy trucks, another race car and a fire engine, even construction equipment, a tank and an airplane too. A perceptive child could almost bear their motors roar into life!

Being a little girl though, who has not yet quite grown up, it was that marvelous wicker doll buggy by the table and the sweet doll comfortably lying inside, that warmed my heart! And on a Victrola in the corner, the figure of Santa himself with a jolly elf standing under the lamplight, turned back the clock, bringing me right to Christmas Eve in Chicago, during the mid-years of the fourth decade of the 20th Century. It was a magical moment for sure!

They say one picture is worth a thousand words. How many words of wonderment and joy would we ever imagine when gazing upon these memorable scenes!

Two little boys – one anxiously calling a parent to share the marvelous make-believe world he found under the Christmas tree; the other perhaps lost in a host of magical dreams. This is what a child's Christmas is all about!

But here at "Grandma's House" during the first holiday celebration in two long years, toys and fir trees, quaint decorations and things of the past were definitely for everyone!



We have Pat Finnerty, our special roving photographer, to thank for these truly wonderful pictures. He so beautifully captured the spirit of the season and the magic of the moment in each and every photo!



Resembling Santa himself our Historical Society President Norm Huitt visits with two guests who came to the Holiday Open House early and stayed for the entire afternoon. Here Norm is sharing the story of trolley service in Urbandale while holding one of his miniature toy trolley cars to accent the history lesson!

In the background, seated beside the piano, we welcome a little Dutch lady named Johanna Schmitt, who we are happy to say, is a brand new member of our Historical Society!



We may not have had our Christmas snow then, but holiday spirit was alive and well in Urbandale! Folks stopped by, one by one, for our Open House, and families came too, some who had never been to the house before, others who returned with a smile, happy to once again walk among yesterday's treasures.

What would a party be without sweet treats to share. And so, a few of those “Christmas elves” spread a little more cheer and happily whipped up a cookie or two for our guests.

A big bowl of punch, the color of holly, stood on the dining room table, and gingerbread boys scampered ‘round gingerbread houses which had frosted white rooftops and a tiny cinnamon heart on each door.

*Butter cookie cut-cuts and many more colorful sweets tempted guests that afternoon, and all were offered **without a calorie to their name!** (That’s what one of those “Christmas elves” whispered to another ... or so I’ve been told!)*



Dan Creters and his mother Joyce enjoy a visit to the Olmsted-Urban House office.

In the picture on the right, Joyce Creters’ husband Chuck is eyeing a plate of cookies that Joyce baked for the Open House. Some decisions, as to which design to choose, can be difficult, especially when one knows that each and every cookie is super tasty!





Cynthia Dabrieo (left in above photo) and Gloria Anderson were our very special “elves” that afternoon. Here again no pointy shoes worn with turned-up toes or tiny bells jingling at the tip of elf-like stocking caps. What

they did wear were their sweetest smiles as they went about assembling the refreshments, replenishing the punch and happily welcoming friends and newcomers alike!



Everyone enjoyed Beth Haigh’s beautiful centerpieces on the table and the buffet.

A few familiar faces (like Will Page center and Joyce Creters with son Dan, also at right) came to choose their treats, along with new friends with whom we are yet to become better acquainted.



Cynthia and Gloria were our ambassadors of good will along with fellow Historical Society member Ginny Campbell who thoroughly enjoyed a memorable visit with this delightful little lady in the picture below. Through the merriment of the moment, however, Ginny missed learning her name, but we hope she will return for another Open House and a proper introduction.



We do know that the smile in the lower picture belongs to Linda Wilson, while her husband Rob seems to be a bit camera shy! Not so their good friend, who also came to celebrate the season at "Grandma's House".





And so it was ...

The first hour gradually slipped into the second with wishes and laughter, strolls through the rooms, and the telling of what once had been.

Old friendships were renewed that long awaited afternoon and new friendships made, together with good times shared and hope for the future, as we looked forward to more celebrations yet to come. Through it all the beautiful lights of Christmas continued to glow with the gift of good will and the gift of sweet memories.

For us at "Grandma's House" a large portion of those memories center 'round the love and commitment of our own special "Christmas elves", and that mystical gift-giver whose very name evokes the spirit of the season. Oh, the joy he brings to the little ones! You can see it in their smiles ... the children of today and the still-believing child of yesterday!





**May you always believe in
THE MAGIC OF
CHRISTMAS
and the man who helped
Santa
“make it happen”**



The Norm Huitt Family

***Norm, Faith
and “Santa” too!***

***(Daughter Amanda
Reedy came all the way
from Cedar Rapids to
play Santa and warm
the hearts of the little
ones.)***

“Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!”

Carol Lee Riekenberg