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FIG. 1. A nineteenth-century etching of a woman buying a Christmas tree. Such images in Church magazines reflect the commercial aspect of the religious holiday. From *Juvenile Instructor* 16, no. 24 (December 15, 1881): 285.



# “All Hail to Christmas”

## Mormon Pioneer Holiday Celebrations

Richard Ian Kimball

To Mormon historians and members of the Church generally, Christmas is not a particularly “Mormon” holiday. Though contemporary Latter-day Saints throughout the world embrace a variety of traditions that commemorate the holiday, no major body of distinctively Mormon tradition surrounds the day in December traditionally reserved for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Mormons celebrate the holiday like most other Christians—reading from the nativity account in Luke, exchanging presents, and spending time with family and friends. Santa Claus, decorated trees, and the redemptive story of Ebenezer Scrooge all are staples of the winter holiday for Mormons in the United States (fig. 1). Some members of the Church lament that Christmas celebrations have devolved into a commercialized ritual focused on the acquisition of goods rather than on a solemn remembrance of the Savior’s birth. Such critics seek to put “Christ” back into “Christmas” and return to the days of old, when the holiday meant more than toys and shopping trips.

In Mormon history, such halcyon days of Christmas past never existed. Nevertheless, the celebrations of Christmas and the New Year—the central components of the pioneer Saints’ holiday season—carried considerable cultural importance before, and especially after, 1870. The winter holiday season was annually anticipated and widely celebrated, and it served as the crowning social event of the year, being preeminently important to early Mormons. As an 1869 editorial in the *Juvenile Instructor* recorded, the winter holidays provided “long evenings for social gatherings and parties and pleasant fire-side intercourse, and in no country and among no people are they more valued than in our Territory and by the Saints who reside here.”<sup>1</sup> By about 1870, the Saints in Salt Lake City celebrated Christmas in much the same way we do today. Santa Claus, gifts, and parties and socials competed with the birth of Christ as the central focus of the Mormon Christmas.

Celebrations revolved around a season of merriment that included both holidays, though, much like today, each holiday meant something different to the pioneer Saints. Christmas was a time of friends, frolics, and feasts. In addition to its religious connotations, this holiday offered the Saints a chance to close out the year in high style with a public expression of gratitude and

joy for the bounties brought in during the recently concluded harvest. The commemoration of the New Year, on the other hand, was more contemplative and provided early Mormons with an opportunity to assess the past year and contemplate the future. Pioneer New Year's celebrations were more subdued than those of today and included expressions of gratitude for past blessings and declarations of hope for the coming year.<sup>2</sup>

## Utah Holiday

After the Saints arrived in Utah, records of Christmas celebrations offer a fairly complete picture of Christmas and New Year's celebrations. Newspaper and journal accounts attest that the winter holiday period carried considerable cultural importance to pioneer Mormons. The Mormons combined American and European Christmas traditions, and in this amalgam emerged a tradition that became the "Mormon Christmas." Part import, part homegrown, the resulting celebrations recalled holiday festivities from other parts of the world while containing a distinct Latter-day Saint sensibility that required moderation and self-control in merry-making.

Even as they struggled for sufficient food and shelter, the Mormon pioneers took time their first year in the Valley to celebrate Christmas and staged Christmas dinners that ranged from boiled rabbit to splendid spreads. The settlers also set aside time for contemplation and celebration at the close of the year. Some of the story of the first Mormon Christmas holiday celebration in Utah (in 1847) is well known and reflects the deprivation and discomfort of pioneer life. Elizabeth Huffaker, who participated in that first Christmas celebration as a child, recalled that temporal needs overshadowed the holiday festivities. "We all worked as usual that day," she remembered. "The men gathered sage brush, and some even plowed, for though it had snowed, the ground was soft and the plows were used nearly the entire day." On the following day, Sunday, a large meeting was held around the flagpole at the center of the fort. Children played and the group sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Huffaker's Christmas dinner consisted of boiled rabbit and bread. Despite spending the holiday in unfamiliar and straitened circumstances, Huffaker concluded that "in the sense of perfect peace and good will I never had a happier Christmas in all my life."<sup>3</sup>

Young Elizabeth Huffaker may have captured the way most Mormons in the Valley spent their first Christmas, but there were some who celebrated more festively. According to the diary of Eliza R. Snow, a flurry of holiday activities began before Christmas and extended through the New Year. On December 23, 1847, Sister Snow attended a dinner with several friends at Brother Writer's home, where they "had a good time." Sister Susa Young Gates, one of the attendees, referred to this and other occasions as "organiz'd parties." Christmas Day found Eliza at a party hosted by



Lorenzo Young. At least a dozen guests “freely & sociably partook of the good things of the earth,” including a “splendid dinner.”<sup>4</sup> Another pioneer Christmas party was a social for the little girls of the camp, hosted by Clara Decker Young. The week between Christmas and New Year’s found women gathering at the Willis home, where President John Smith taught and blessed them; other Saints assembled to hear Parley P. Pratt give a discourse titled “The Velocity of the Motion of Bodies When Surrounded by a Refined Element”; still others held dinner parties to note the upcoming New Year.<sup>5</sup>

As resources increased over the next several years, the pioneer Saints demonstrated their attachment to the Christmas holiday by steadily enlarging the size and scope of their holiday activities. Catherine Wooley spent the second Christmas in the Valley hosting a dancing party for seventeen couples. The guests ate refreshments at eight, one, and again at three o’clock as they promenaded through the night.<sup>6</sup> An even larger crowd gathered at Brigham Young’s home to celebrate Christmas 1850. One hundred fifty guests celebrated with a large feast comprised of locally grown foodstuffs. Dancing occupied the visitors “until a late hour.” Though sweets were a luxury during most of the year, by the Saints’ second Christmas in Salt Lake, a sufficient supply of molasses had been stored to make candy canes for the children. Honey taffy and animal-shaped cookies made from sweet dough filled children’s stockings.<sup>7</sup> In 1850, a brass band traveled on horseback throughout Salt Lake City on Christmas morning, serenading leading Church officials.<sup>8</sup> Within three years of the Valley’s settlement, widespread celebrations of the Christmas holiday—from fetes involving hundreds of guests to small family celebrations in rough-hewn cabins—had surfaced in the Great Basin.

Christmas celebrations in Utah continued to grow in size and significance. On Christmas morning in 1852, hundreds of public workers, led by self-proclaimed “public hand” Brigham Young, descended on the Carpenter’s Hall in Salt Lake City for a “mammoth party.” Hours of dancing, singing, and listening to speeches kept the partygoers busy into the night. The assembly accepted a donation of candies and raisins, which had been sent to the party by a Captain Hooper, and divided it among the poor so they, too, could enjoy some luxuries of the season. Just twelve hours after the Christmas Day party closed, more than five hundred persons filled the hall again for a second day of dancing and revelry, which lasted from ten o’clock in the morning until midnight.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Long Holiday Season**

The Saints in early Utah celebrated the birth of Christ as part of a longer holiday season that began before Christmas and extended into the

New Year.<sup>10</sup> On January 5, 1854, the *Deseret News* reported that the Social Hall, then Salt Lake City's largest place of indoor assemblage, "has been occupied every afternoon and evening . . . by social parties; changing daily, and vieing with each other which shall enjoy themselves most, while each in their turn have seemed to be full, enjoying all they were capable of." Furthermore, "the assemblies will be continued from day to day till all the public hands have had a cotillon [*sic*] dance."<sup>11</sup> A week of public parties, dances, and amusements—referred to in another newspaper article as the "customary annual period of relaxation"—initiated not only the celebration of Christmas but also the busiest social season of the year.<sup>12</sup> One report from Fillmore in 1860 related that "sleigh riding and other amusements have been the order of the day for the last two weeks, and dinner, pic-nic and dancing parties have been well attended and on such occasions the *pungoes*, as the natives call them, have had to move lively."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the holiday season kept Mormons in Fillmore and other parts of Utah moving from sleigh to dance floor to party.

Mormons, like other Americans, had come to expect a festive season at the close of the year during which they could enjoy the company of distant friends and relatives and express gratitude for a bountiful harvest. Christmas and the New Year dovetailed with the slow season in agricultural Utah. Crops had already been gathered, and the frozen ground usually prevented plowing. Of this lax period, the *Deseret News* commented in 1865:

Holiday times are coming . . . workmen are taking the holidays, because they can't help it; sad interferers [*sic*] with outdoor work, those storms. Good fires are pleasant just now. Are those big piles of wood still held in reserve in the lower wards? Remember the poor, where you find them, you who are comfortable; their comfort will add to your pleasures.

Further advising the holiday merrymakers, the paper reminded readers to "take care of yourselves when you get heated with dancing, and avoid catching colds."<sup>14</sup>

### Admonitions and Regulations

Not all Christmas festivities, however, received the approbation of Church leaders. Just days after Brigham Young's large 1850 holiday party was carried off in decorous fashion, Apostle Parley P. Pratt took aim at less respectable Christmas activities. On New Year's Day 1851, Pratt delivered a sermon at the Fourteenth Ward schoolhouse. Pratt hoped that "the same proceedings would not be permitted in that house as were practiced in some parts of the valley. For instance," Pratt pointed out, "some of his young people rode out to the north country, at Christmass [*sic*], spent the Sabbath, &c.—and was informed they had been to a party, ate and drank, fiddled and danced. Did they sing and pray at their party? No! Did they ask



a blessing at the table? No!” Pratt “told his folks he did not wish them to attend any more dances among a people who had no time to sing, pray, ask a blessing, or go to meeting.” Apostle Wilford Woodruff followed Pratt by arguing that “when any people, suffered themselves to be led away by vanity, folly, or recreation, so far as to banish God from their thoughts and ways, they BOUGHT THEIR WIT TOO DEAR.”<sup>15</sup> Elders Pratt and Woodruff seemed more concerned with maintaining the rectitude of Mormon gatherings than the sanctity of the Christmas holiday, but their criticisms speak to an early concern with the manner of holiday celebrations. In some ways, these brethren were reminding the Saints to keep Christ in Christmas—to maintain a reverential attitude of thanksgiving when commemorating the birth of the Savior.

Admonition against excessive merrymaking during the holidays became an expected complement to announcements for parties, dances, and socials. Writing about the holiday social season, editors at the *Deseret News* recognized the necessity of celebrating but warned against too much amusement:

There is much more leisure time at the command of the people than at any other season of the year. It is a time of very general relaxation from arduous toil; and amusements, parties and other sources of social intercourse and enjoyment receive a large share of attention by many. Dancing is a good and healthy exercise when it is not indulged in to excess and when proper precautions are taken to avoid injurious results. . . . But no wise person would wish to dance every evening.<sup>16</sup>

Even during the Christmas holiday, the scriptural injunction requiring moderation in all things prevailed, so the Saints sought to keep their leisure-time activities in check. The consumption of alcohol was particularly proscribed. In establishing the behavioral boundaries for the 1860 holiday season, the *Deseret News* offered no freedom to imbibe in the spirits of Christmas: “No gentleman will ever obtrude his presence upon any respectable company, while he is affected by the distillations of wheat or barley.” If a kind word failed to dissuade drunkards from a dance, “something more than a hint like this should be made tangible to them.”<sup>17</sup> The peace of the Christmas season was to accompany the pioneers’ holiday celebrations even if it had to be enforced with a “tangible” push toward temperance.

The Saints took care not to mix their celebrations with the Sabbath day. Even more sedate Christmas celebrations—dancing, visiting, and attending socials—were not “generally deemed as fitting to be performed on the Sabbath as on a week day”; when the calendar called for a Sunday Christmas, celebrations were rescheduled to avoid the Sabbath.<sup>18</sup> Celebrations commemorating the religious holiday did not measure up to the standards for observing the weekly Sabbath holy day.

## Rowdyism during the Holidays

The Saints' fears about rowdyism disrupting Christmas Day celebrations stemmed from a long history of unseemly and sordid behavior that surrounded the year-end holidays in America and Europe. Historian Stephen Nissenbaum has concluded that early American Christmas celebrations, like their European predecessors, "involved behavior that most of us would find offensive and even shocking today—rowdy public displays of excessive eating and drinking, the mockery of established authority, aggressive begging (often involving the threat of doing harm), and even the invasion of wealthy homes."<sup>19</sup> Although rowdy public behavior proved unpopular among most Latter-day Saints, Christmas festivities provided license for some revelers to follow such less-refined traditions.

While evidence of a handful of ill-mannered public holiday displays has been preserved, most evidence of immoderate Christmas revelry must be found between the lines of the historical sources. For example, although most Christmas celebrations went off without a hitch, peaceful displays of Christmas cheer were on occasion considered worthy of remark. Following Christmas Day 1860, the *Deseret News* recorded:

There was no rowdyism seen in the streets, nor unusual demonstrations made of a belligerent character, such as we have seen on such occasions, indicating that if there are any rowdies about, they are not very anxious to show off. . . . At the time of going to press no unpleasant circumstance had transpired, and it is believed that none occurred to mar the festivities of the occasion.<sup>20</sup>

Three years later, the holidays passed "in a quiet, peaceable, orderly manner, drunkenness and rowdyism being no part of the ceremonies."<sup>21</sup> The fact that a quiet Christmas elicited a response in the local paper indicates that not all holidays passed off so peaceably.

Other reports directly signify the intemperate activities that often accompanied the holidays. On December 24, 1862, a *Deseret News* editorialist commented, "It is presumed that [Christmas] will be very generally observed by the Deseretans as a holiday, an arrangement to which we would not particular[ly] object if the supposed anniversary of the birth of the Savior was not too often desecrated by intemperance and the disgraceful performances of many of its observers."<sup>22</sup> Usually, the rowdy behavior was associated with alcohol, as in 1859, when a group of "christians, dissenters, and other outsiders, with some who profess better things have tarried too long 'at the wine,' or made too free use of 'mountain dew.'"<sup>23</sup> Non-Mormons were often blamed for the flare-ups of Christmas incivility. In 1861 the newspaper ruthlessly attacked rabble rousers who spilled their Christmas indulgence into the holiday streets of Salt Lake City. The editorialist hoped that decent Christmas celebrations could take place in the near future without "being molested by the unhallowed yells and disgusting



performances of reckless beings reveling in dissipation and debauchery, as has often been the case during the last three years.” Eight reckless revelers—including a judge, an attorney, one “professional rowdy,” and “one youthful aspirant for distinction”—appeared before the bar that year to answer for their holiday offenses. Fines ranging from five to fifty dollars were levied against this crew for “furious driving,” drunkenness, and fighting. One rowdy was cited for running a horse over a female pedestrian.<sup>24</sup>

On several occasions, rowdy holiday behavior in Salt Lake City turned violent. Not even the Sabbath day was spared. Such was the case on Christmas Day 1859, a Sabbath Christmas that turned bloody. Just after Sabbath services at the Tabernacle adjourned, a gang-style gunfight disrupted the quietude of Sunday afternoon. As many as fifty shots volleyed across the streets of Salt Lake City as W. A. Hickman’s group pursued Lot Huntington and his minions. The chase lasted for a quarter mile down the street to the front of Townsend’s hotel and concluded when Huntington took shelter in a house. The shoot-out involved eight or ten persons, though none but Huntington and Hickman received injuries. Unexpected on any day of the year, this violent outburst marred that year’s Christmas celebration and was remembered as “one of the most disgusting and disgraceful affrays that ever transpired in this city.”<sup>25</sup>

When other rowdy, but less violent, outbursts interrupted peaceful Christmas gatherings, the *Deseret News* often poked fun at the ruffians—as though such behavior, while unacceptable, was an expected part of the holiday festivities for some residents of Salt Lake City. For example, in 1869 Pat Morley and Mack Murphy got into a brawl after they had drunk too much. Neither was hurt, but each carried “marks of the engagement” when they appeared before the judge. Lacking any of the gravity that typically attended crime reporting, the paper summarized the events humorously: “On investigating the matter, [the judge] decided that such pugilistic displays are contrary to the law and opposed to good order. Each gentleman (?) was therefore desired to contribute \$10 to the city fund, or, in default, take apartments in the Rock House situated in the rear of the Hall.”<sup>26</sup>

Although most Christmas celebrations remained quiet with most participants “brimful of good nature,”<sup>27</sup> sometimes a reenactment of rowdy holiday traditions led to drunkenness and fighting, which were generally disdained and guarded against. But the occasional minor flare-up or intemperate holiday behavior was accepted with good humor as a vestige of a bygone era, the spirit of Christmases past.

## Holiday Food

As has been evident, no Christmas celebration in pioneer times was complete without a feast. Even when families had no means to provide



gifts, they went to great lengths to procure extra food to make the holiday special (fig. 2). Like the Cratchits in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Latter-day Saint families felt to thank God for even a small feast when they had little more than each other.

Mormon immigrants from across the world carried their culinary Christmas traditions with them when they gathered to Zion. Scottish Saints made shortcake for their holiday celebrations, while Danish Saints supped on "sweet soup made of rice and fruit juice."<sup>28</sup> Many Scandinavian immigrants ate their celebratory dinner on Christmas Eve. On Christmas and New Year's Day, Scandinavian Saints looked forward to rice mush cooked in milk and sweetened with cinnamon and sugar.<sup>29</sup> Even the animals in Scandinavian homes received an extra share of food to commemorate Christmas day. Of course, plum pudding was the season's delight for British settlers in Utah. Ann Mailin Sharp, a handcart pioneer of 1856, made her holiday concoction with "flour, suet, molasses, dried groundcherries, and a few dried wild currants." The ingredients, "sewed up in a white cloth," were "kept boiling for hours in the kettle hanging over the fireplace." When the pudding finished cooking, a small amount of brandy was poured over it and lit with a match. The blue flame rising from the pudding may very well have reminded British converts of the Christmases of their past and given them hope for a bright future in Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Wilson Howard Dusenberry noted that a Christmas celebration at Cluff's Hall in Provo provided him the "best dinner I ever ate in Utah."<sup>31</sup> But not all pioneer Christmas dinners turned out to be the best ever. Isaac

**CHRISTMAS, 1870.**  
**Fresh Arrivals for the.**  
**HOLIDAYS.**  
**G. W. DAVIS**  
**BEGS to announce that he has JUST RECEIVED a Choice Stock of**  
**Gunpowder Tea,**  
**Extra fine Natural Leaf do.**  
**Rio and Java Coffee,**  
**Sugars, all kinds,**  
**Raisins and Currants,**  
**Peel and Spice,**  
**Prime Oregon**  
**Bacon,**  
**New York**  
**Cheese,**  
**CANDY AND CANDY TOYS**  
 In endless variety!  
 All of which will be sold at the  
**LOWEST PRICES**  
 To suit the times.  
 Our **FRUITS** are all Cleaned.  
 Call and examine Prices and Quality  
 See Window for Samples.  
**G. W. DAVIS,**  
**OPPOSITE SALT LAKE HOUSE,**  
 ALSO  
**2 doors north of Kimball & Lawrence's**  
 1870

FIG. 2. An advertisement for unusual Christmas foods and gifts. From *Deseret Evening News*, December 7, 1870, 2.



and Elizabeth Grace, converts to the Church and emigrants from Liverpool, England, settled in Nephi, Utah, late in 1851. Scurrying to finish building the Graces' home before Christmas, Isaac and neighbor Charles Sperry worked diligently despite the December wind, and the family moved in on Christmas Day. To dry the frozen mortar that supported the new mud adobe chimney, the Graces built a large fire and began to cook their Christmas dinner. Just as familiar holiday smells filled their homey cabin, a loud crash disrupted their activities. They turned to see their newly thawed fireplace crashing to the ground, their Christmas dinner covered by a heap of warm, wet adobe. Not able to hold back her tears, Elizabeth picked up their two small children and retreated to their wagon. There is no mention of plum pudding or sweet soup in the account of the Graces' first Christmas in Utah.<sup>32</sup>

### Holiday Amusements

Second only to feasting and socializing with family, dancing proved popular for nearly every group of holiday revelers—from small family gatherings to ward socials to large jubilee gatherings. As if it were sounding an official decree, the *Deseret News* on December 25, 1861, declared the pre-eminent place of dancing in Mormon holiday culture:

In the observance of anniversaries and holidays or the appropriation of any part or portion of time for a specific purpose, every nation, kindred, tongue and people have notions peculiar to themselves, suited to their political, religious and social existence, and particularly in the choice of amusements and the time to indulge in festive or social recreation, every nation and community do as they please when not interdicted by constitutional or statute laws to which they may be subject. Exercising that right the people of Utah have, by almost universal consent, adopted dancing as their principal amusement and selected the winter season as the most suitable for indulging in that favorite recreation, believing that inasmuch as there is a time for every purpose and for every work no more appropriate season than the winter months could be designated as the "time to dance."<sup>33</sup>

And dance they did. Mormon Christmas parties nearly always included dancing. The Saints stayed warm during the winter months by stepping lively to the music of bands, lone violins, hand clapping, or even whistling. On Christmas Eve in 1860, for example, Heber C. Kimball hosted a party for his family and neighbors, where he "mingle[d] freely in the dance[s]."<sup>34</sup> The pioneers in Tooele marked their community's first Christmas by gathering in John Rowberry's home for a party and dance. Because no one in the settlement owned a musical instrument, dancers reeled to the sounds of Cyrus Call's whistling and danced until midnight.<sup>35</sup> This and numerous other examples illustrate the Mormons' love of dancing and its prominence in Christmas gatherings.



Other holiday activities existed for those not drawn to the dance. The theater offered one popular alternative. In 1862, for example, the newly renovated Salt Lake Theater reopened its doors on Christmas Eve, and a "crowded house at the Theatre" became a hallmark of the holiday season.<sup>36</sup>

Still other ways to spend the holiday included sleighing and visiting. Often these two activities were combined, as in the case of Brigham Young. As in so many other things, Brother Brigham's 1865 celebration set the pace, according to the *Deseret News*: "Among the 'sleigh items' of the times, we noticed President Young and a number of the male members of his family, with a few friends, out sleigh driving on Monday, in that mammoth sleigh, with some others of a smaller calibre in the wake."<sup>37</sup> Though sleighs were often a necessary mode of travel over frozen roads, sleigh riding on Christmas transcended mere transportation and reflected one's status in the community. That same year, one reporter surveyed the Christmas scene and concluded, "Sleigh-riding seemed to be at a premium, and pedestrianism at a discount. The city appeared to be—not on wheels—but on curvated iron appliances, our local[s], a big crowd of boys, and a few other folks seeming to be the only people who were using their pedal extremities."<sup>38</sup> The Christmas Day promenade that marked the holiday in cities like Philadelphia took on a different form when it arrived in Utah. In this case, form trumped function—the sleigh was the thing.

Another pioneer Christmas tradition was the festive holiday greeting "Christmas gift!" On Christmas morning, children and adults rushed to see who could be the first to wish another a "Christmas gift." The one with the fastest mouth received a piece of candy for his or her sleight of tongue.<sup>39</sup> This tradition harked back to an earlier European holiday tradition that permitted peasants, apprentices, and servants to demand gifts from their patrons in exchange for their goodwill throughout the year—similar to our contemporary Halloween. The social hierarchy was temporarily upended to allow the peasant to become the lord of the manor—to drink the lord's best wine and eat his finest foods. Although at one time such social inversions had produced a rowdy, even violent, Christmas season, the tradition had mellowed by the time it reached pioneer Utah. The salutation "Christmas gift" implied no social inversion, even if the greeting recalled the earlier tradition.<sup>40</sup>

### **"Christmas out in Mormondom"**

Not all who celebrated Christmas in Utah were Mormon, however. Almost from the beginning of Mormon settlement, a variety of Christmas celebrations existed in addition to the Mormon forms. These "other" celebrations of Christmas tell us much about the fluidity of Mormon society and describe its more rigid social boundaries as well. Although it appears—



for good reason—that the soldiers of Johnston’s army did not try to celebrate Christmas with the Saints, later visitors did their best to join Mormon celebrations. While generally welcome at the festivities, the visitors were not always received with open arms, particularly on the dance floor. Captain Francis Marion Bishop, a topographer on John Wesley Powell’s second expedition down the Colorado River, spent Christmas with the Saints in Kanab in 1871. Rife with sarcasm, Bishop’s picturesque journal entry for December 25 captures the difficulties that outsiders faced when trying to fit in with the Saints:

Snow, rain and wind. A Merry Christmas this is indeed. In Utah or in Arizona it’s all the same. Free as we are here, we are to be favored by Mrs. Thompson with a plum pudding for Christmas dinner. After dinner, Fred, Clem, Mac, Andy, Jack and I rode up into Utah to see what the Mormons are doing. Stayed until after ten o’clock and rode back into Arizona and there concluded our Christmas at Camp 94. One can but be amused at the queer style of the Latter-day Saints, as they style themselves. So uncouth in all their movements; so void of grace of look or action. The boys are somewhat incensed at the treatment they received, being somewhat unceremoniously snubbed by the Kanab belles. The *Effort* was opened by a Mormon prayer, followed by a speech[?] from Bishop [Levi] Stewart.<sup>41</sup>

So far from home, the members of a scientific expedition might have expected a warmer reception, but Christmas in Kanab may have been reserved for family, close friends, and Church members. Bishop’s reception left him with a less-than-favorable impression of the Mormons.

Bishop’s co-worker Walter Clement Powell (“Clem” in Bishop’s journal account) provides more detail on the expedition’s Kanab Christmas and offers a poignant description of the mixture of celebration and sadness that characterized his “Christmas out in Mormondom.” By Christmas Eve, Clement Powell already felt the pangs of homesickness. “Would give anything if I could spend the holidays at the dear old home,” Clem recorded in his journal. While his cabinmate visited a friend, Clem spent the evening “watching the dying embers that smoldered in the fireplace, calling up the faces of loved ones far away.” Early the next morning, Clem awakened to guns and pistols saluting the holiday and felt the “mingled feelings of pleasure and pain that it was again Christmas.” Immediately Clem “wafted a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year homeward.” Much of the rest of Clem’s Christmas Day was spent in reverie and relaxation. Trying to get up a game of ball (which did not materialize because no one could agree on a set of rules), watching others play quoits, and playing cards occupied most of his time and kept his mind off the folks at home. Mrs. Jacob Hamblin presented him with an apple for a Christmas gift, but the high point of Clem’s day was a Christmas dinner of ham, sardines, milk, butter, bread, coffee, and plum pudding.



After dinner, the boys traveled to Kanab. Though they arrived at the dance “all gay and in good spirits” after a “splendid gallop over the sage-covered plain,” the boys’ hopes were quickly dashed. During the dance, the boys consistently “got the mitten” when they asked uninterested girls to join them on the dance floor. Unlike Captain Bishop, who blamed the snub on uncouth Mormon ways, Clem pointed to the visitors’ behavior. On the way to the dance, the boys had imbibed a little too much in the spirit of the holiday—in this case, a bottle of wine. Smelling the liquor on their breath, the Kanab belles refused to be entreated.<sup>42</sup>

### Christmas in a Contemporary Style

Within about two decades of the Mormons’ arrival in the Great Basin, Christmas had assumed many of the characteristics with which it is associated today—commercialism, presents, and Santa Claus. Although the birth of Christ was the central backdrop to the holiday festivities, commerce and consumption quickly came to occupy a central place in the Christmas season.

As early as December 1858, the Globe bakery in Salt Lake City wished its patrons a “Merry Christmas” as part of its advertisement in the *Deseret News*.<sup>43</sup> The next year, city streets were “thronged, and the stores, shops and market places were filled with customers, buying, selling and exchanging, plainly indicating that something more than common was inciting them to action.” Vendors along East Temple Street had constructed displays “to please the eye and attract the attention of those who might be in search of something to supply the wants of the outer or inner man.”<sup>44</sup> By the end of the 1860s, advertisements for Christmas gifts had become a staple of the *Deseret News* throughout December and into January every year. In 1867, the newspaper noted the arrival of the holiday on the streets of Salt Lake City and in the paper’s pages as well: “Christmas is coming! Any body would think so by taking a walk down the street and looking at the stores. As every one will want to make a variety of purchases during these holiday times, we recommend them to glance through the advertising columns of the *News*, and find where they can get best suited.”<sup>45</sup> In developing a commercial orientation toward the winter holidays, Mormons kept pace with other Americans, who, by the 1860s, enjoyed Christmas marketplaces with “an ever-expanding array of consumer choices” that regularly evoked “expressions of awe and disorientation, amazement and stupefaction.”<sup>46</sup>

Newspaper and street displays offered a gamut of Christmas gifts as well as the ingredients for a Christmas feast. Christmas food and candies, pudding, currants, firecrackers, toys, dolls, music boxes, and books were just some of the potential presents available in Salt Lake City stores.<sup>47</sup> More expensive gifts included furs and boots.<sup>48</sup> To guarantee a Christmas morning



**Z. C. M. I.**

—:o:—

**EAGLE EMPORIUM—RETAIL**

—:o:—

**D**URING CHRISTMAS and NEW YEAR'S  
WEEK we will open a

**BAZAAR**

OF CHOICE

**Domestic, Japanese**

AND

**Chinese Novelties**

FOR

**CHRISTMAS PRESENTS.**

—  
Also a Fine Assortment of GENUINE

**Irish Poplins,**

**Moire Antiques,**

**Velvets, Plushes & Silks,**

**Fine Shawls and Wraps,**

**Ladies' Work Boxes**

**and Fine Jewelry.**

—  
**FUR SETS, - \$3.25**

And upwards.

FIG. 3. An advertisement for the Church-owned cooperative ZCMI. From *Deseret Evening News*, December 7, 1870, 2.



surprise, the gifts could be wrapped in paper sold at the *Deseret News* office.<sup>49</sup> Not all gifts were useful or expensive, however. For example, early in December 1870, ZCMI's "Eagle Emporium" advertised a selection of "Japanese and Chinese Novelties for Christmas Presents" (fig. 3).<sup>50</sup>

Newspaper advertisements on Christmas Eve 1870 demonstrate that every conceivable commercial product was available from Salt Lake City merchants. Just one column of advertising tempted consumers to purchase "a perfectly fitting suit of clothes" from tailor C. Thirkill; "nicknacks, Cakes, Christmas Trees . . . Pine-apples, and other imported fruits" at the store of Henry Wallace; "first class cuts" of beef, mutton, and pork; and a "Splendid Assortment of New Goods, both beautiful and cheap, expressly adapted for Christmas and New Year's Gifts" from Carl C. Asmussen. Taken together, it seemed possible to "procure the necessaries for a first-class Christmas" just by visiting the vendors along East Temple Street.<sup>51</sup> Some merchants, including ZCMI, stayed open until late on Christmas Eve to accommodate last-minute shoppers.<sup>52</sup> When Christmas had passed and merchants still had goods on their shelves, after-Christmas sales promised, "BARGAINS! BARGAINS!!" for those who had yet to spend all their money.<sup>53</sup> By 1870 the commercial Christmas carried the day—at least in terms of public displays along the boulevards of Salt Lake City and on the pages of the *Deseret News*.

Many of the presents purchased along East Temple Street immediately became the property of Santa Claus, who filled stockings in Mormon settlements throughout the West. Looking forward to the Christmas holiday in 1869, the *Deseret News* reported:

Christmas, as it comes around in each revolving season, brings to mind many sweet recollections of the past. With what ardent anticipations we hung up our stockings and went to sleep on Christmas eve, and with the first dawn of the morning came the rubbing of little eyes, the prattle of little tongues and the patter of little feet rushing off to ascertain whether old Santa Claus had come down the chimney to pay a kindly visit and fill the stockings with *bon bons*.<sup>54</sup>

Santa Claus had become as much a part of Christmas celebrations—especially to children—as snow, feasting, and social gatherings. Visits from Santa Claus represented the hub of a child's Christmas (fig. 4). Even when times were tough and money hard to come by, some parents extended themselves, scrimped, and saved enough money to provide something special from Santa. At Union Fort in 1861, Ann Mailin Sharp made sure that her daughter Ann had a special doll in her stocking that year. To help Santa, little Annie's mother had sent to England for the doll's head, arranged to have the head carted across the plains in a covered wagon, constructed a soft body for the doll, and clothed it in a "full skirted pioneer costume." Little Annie was the envy of her neighborhood friends as they clamored to play with her gift from Santa.<sup>55</sup>





FIG. 4. Children in early Utah, as today, looked forward to a visit from Santa. From *Juvenile Instructor* 42 (December 15, 1907): 756.

Though the number of gifts varied and Santa's deliveries did not always meet up to children's expectations, there was almost always something for each child to enjoy on the holiday morning. As Sarah Bell Harris remembered, Santa "nearly always . . . left a few raisins, a few pieces of candy and sometimes a glass or mug or an old doll made new with a new dress. Often he left a pair of warm mittens or a new pair of knitted stockings."<sup>56</sup> Sometimes, Santa could not afford even that and left only a lump of sugar, a piece of fruit, or cookies made from dough sweetened with molasses. Even if expectation exceeded reality, Santa was here to stay. In the adobe cottage Maud Bliss Allen called her childhood home, Christmas Eve was not complete until she had recited "The Night before Christmas," complete with her signature line—"On Comet, on Cupid, on Dunder and Blitzen."<sup>57</sup>

Other poignant and humorous scenes filled Mormon homes on Christmas morning. On one Christmas Eve in pioneer Ephraim, two young girls excitedly tacked their woolen stockings to the front of their family fireplace. Scurrying off to bed, both girls had visions of the next morning, when, if Santa Claus had made it to Ephraim on his travels throughout the world, they would reach into their stockings and find a glorious mug. When morning arrived, one sister anxiously poked into her stocking and pulled out the much anticipated mug. Hot on her sister's heels, the other



pioneer girl peered inside her own stocking and, much to her chagrin, found only an apple and a fried cake. Dejected, she blurted out disgustedly, "Such darn partiality." Bowed, but unbroken, the second sister managed to find the bottom of her stocking, where she discovered her own mug "and was so happy she forgave Santa Claus."<sup>58</sup>

The character of Santa Claus often assumed a religious role in the minds of children. Sarah D. Jensen described the relationship of pioneer children to Santa in Ephraim: "The pioneer children all had divine faith in Santa Claus, but didn't expect him to bring them many presents."<sup>59</sup> Just up the road in Fountain Green, Utah, C. H. White reminisced about Christmas using terms that place a patina of divinity on the jolly old Christmas elf. She remembered that children "hop[ed] and pray[ed] that Santa would put something" in their stockings. When the children looked into their stockings the next day and found sweet doughnuts twisted into the shapes of boys and girls, they "knew that Santa had heard our prayers."<sup>60</sup> In Washington County in southern Utah, Santa Claus stood in for another biblical figure when Anthony W. Ivins presented each child with a gift of a "small Noah's Ark, filled with candy and a real chocolate Santa Claus steering the ark."<sup>61</sup> As the giver of gifts and the bearer of Christmas spirit, Santa Claus transcended his status as a cultural icon and became a quasi-religious character to the children of Mormon Utah.

In the nineteenth century, as now, even the older folks might invoke the Christmas spirit and God's love in the form of Santa Claus. As captured by Eliza R. Snow, their wishes extended to the poor as well as to themselves:

Remember your time honor'd laws,  
Kind master of the merry glee:  
Prepare your gifts, good Santa Claus,  
And hang them on the Christmas tree.

And where no Christmas trees are found,  
With liberal hand your gifts distill;  
The bags and stocking hanging round,  
Great Santa Claus, be sure to fill.

Untie your purse—enlarge your heart—  
O, do not pass one single door;  
And in your gen'rous walk impart  
Your comforts to the sick and poor.

When eyes are watching for the morn,  
In humble hut and cottage too;  
How disappointed and forlorn,  
If missed, dear Santa Claus, by you

Go all the rounds of baby-hood  
And bless and cheer the hearts of all  
The "little folks," and please be good  
To those who're not so very small.<sup>62</sup>



## “We . . . Wish All . . . a Merry Christmas”

Without question, the Christmas and New Year holiday season was the preeminent social occasion for early Latter-day Saints. Though members of the Church in far-off Utah might have considered themselves a “peculiar people,” widely separated from their American neighbors, their Christmas celebrations did little to set them apart, though Christmas celebrations maintained a handful of particularly Mormon overtones. Commercialism, gift giving, social gatherings, and visits from Santa Claus prevailed along the Wasatch front just as they did elsewhere in the United States.

Not only would most of their contemporaries have been comfortable celebrating Christmas in Utah, but most modern Mormons would feel comfortable joining in with the celebrating pioneer Saints. The following editorial, published by the *Deseret News* on Christmas Eve in 1868, sums up the spirit of Christmas, then as now:

This time honored anniversary has again rolled round, and with its advent what a host of joyful reminiscences crowd the mind. Christmas! The time of never-to-be-forgotten family re-unions and social gatherings. Many of the happiest recollections of our early years are associated with this great anniversary of the Christian world. Christmas is ever green: it never grows old, but as each succeeding year rolls around, each succeeding Christmas is looked to with as much eagerness as its predecessor. That dear old Santa Claus, who fills the stockings with *bon bons* and toys is ever welcomed eagerly by the youngsters, and at that season, in many portions of the earth, the members of families who may have been separated and divided by long distances, make it a point, if possible, to meet again with father and mother and participate in old time joys and pleasures. All hail to Christmas. We delight to honor it, and wish all, especially the readers of the NEWS, a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.<sup>63</sup>

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1. “Editorial Thoughts,” *Juvenile Instructor* 4 (January 2, 1869): 4.
2. Few historians have appreciated the cultural significance of nineteenth-century Mormon Christmas celebrations. Typically, historians have cursorily considered the subject and concluded, as did Milton V. Backman when describing the Saints in Kirtland, that “even Christmas was little more than a routine day.” Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 283. Some historians have delved more deeply into Mormon holiday celebrations. However, these historians tended merely to gather pioneer Christmas stories without providing much social or cultural context to explain how important the holiday celebrations were to Mormons in the nineteenth century.

See John H. Monnett, *A Rocky Mountain Christmas: Yuletide Stories of the West* (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett, 1987); John E. Baur, *Christmas on the American Frontier, 1800–1900* (Caldwell, Id.: Caxton, 1961). Susan Arrington Madsen has compiled and edited a wonderful primary-source collection of pioneer Christmas accounts in *Christmas: A Joyful Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984). In the past several years, scholarly treatments of Christmas in America have mushroomed. The works that have most informed my approach include Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 105–91; Phillip Snyder, *December Twenty-Fifth: The Joys of Christmas Past* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985); William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

3. As quoted in "The Pioneer Christmas," in *Heart Throbs of the West*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1939–51), 2:329. For more on how Mormons celebrated their first Christmas in the Rocky Mountains, see Sherry Lewis Brown, "The First Christmas in the Valley," *Pioneer* 40 (November-December 1993): 13–15.

4. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 214–15.

5. "The First Christmas in the Old Fort," in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1958–77), 17:71.

6. Clarissa Young Spencer and Mable Harmer, *Brigham Young at Home* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1947), 183.

7. "The Pioneers' First Christmas," in Carter, *Heart Throbs of the West*, 2:331.

8. "Christmas Morning," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1850, 180.

9. "The Pioneers' First Christmas," 2:331–33.

10. Such lengthy celebrations to close out the year were not uncommon in the United States or in Europe. As historian Leigh Eric Schmidt notes, "In early modern Europe Christmas was a long season of festivities that reached a crescendo in the week between Christmas and New Year's and that often reverberated through Twelfth Night. . . . Although this pattern of prolonged festivity was severely challenged in the British colonies by Puritans, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Baptists, the holiday jubilee was nonetheless widely replicated in North America, especially in the mid-Atlantic and the South. In the winter lull of agricultural and commercial calendars, the months of December and January gave license to several nights of holiday feasting, imbibing, dancing, masking, and gaming." Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 108–9.

11. "The Social Hall," *Deseret News*, January 5, 1854, [3].

12. "Holiday Festivities," *Deseret News*, January 4, 1855, [3].

13. "From the Late Capital," *Deseret News*, January 11, 1860, 357.

14. "General Items," *Deseret News*, December 21, 1865, 84.

15. "Fourteenth Ward," *Deseret News*, January 11, 1851, 188. Elders Pratt and Woodruff followed in a long line of religious leaders who tried to reclaim the holiday for the righteous. More than a century before, evangelist George Whitefield criticized the "sinful and pious ways of observing that holy season" including "those who ate and drank to excess, those who played cards and dice, those who neglected their worldly callings, those who indulged in luxury and extravagance, misspent the holiday." Whitefield wanted to redeem libertine Christmases and replace them with a day of worship and prayer. See Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 178.



16. "Leisure Hours—Mental Improvement," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1865, 92.
17. "The Ball Room," *Deseret News*, December 26, 1860, 340.
18. "Merry Christmas," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1859, 340.
19. Nissenbaum, *Battle for Christmas*, 5.
20. "Christmas Day," *Deseret News*, December 26, 1860, 337.
21. "The Holiday Festivities," *Deseret News*, January 7, 1863, 221.
22. "Christmas," *Deseret News*, December 24, 1862, 208.
23. "Merry Christmas," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1859, 340.
24. "The Holidays," *Deseret News*, January 9, 1861, 356.
25. "Another Shooting Affray," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1859, 340.
26. "Police," *Deseret Evening News*, December 28, 1869, [3].
27. "Christmas Is Past," *Deseret Evening News*, December 29, 1869, 553.
28. "The Pioneers' First Christmas," 2:334.
29. "Their Christmas," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 2:246; "Julia's Christmas," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 15:198.
30. Mary Ethel Young Lambson, "Christmas in Union Fort in 1861," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 2:122–23; Annie C. Kimball, "The Plum Pudding," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 1:107.
31. "From the Diary of Wilson Howard Dusenberry," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 1:242.
32. Florence McCune Lunt, "A Home for Christmas," in *Treasures of Pioneer History*, comp. Kate B. Carter, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1952–57), 1:112–13.
33. "The Festive Season," *Deseret News*, December 25, 1861, 204. For more on this subject, see Larry V. Shumway, "Dancing the Buckles off Their Shoes in Pioneer Utah," found in both *BYU Studies* 37, no. 3 (1997–98): 6–50; and in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers*, ed. Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 195–221.
34. "President Kimball's New School House" *Deseret News*, December 26, 1860, 337.
35. "Christmas in Tooele," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 4:197–98.
36. "Christmas Eve in the Theatre," *Deseret News*, December 31, 1862, 209; "Christmas," *Deseret News*, January 2, 1867, 5.
37. "General Items," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1865, 98. Latter-day Saints were not the only Americans using Brigham Young's Christmas celebrations as a measuring stick. Julia F. Snow, writing in *Harper's Monthly* in 1866, declared that Santa's fireplace was wide enough to accommodate all of the children's stockings in Brigham Young's family. Julia F. Snow, "Christmas Guests," *Harper's Monthly* 32 (February 1866): 354.
38. "Christmas Day," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1865, 92.
39. Isabella Kerr Wilson, "Ogden's First Christmas," in Carter, *Heart Throbs of the West*, 2:341. For an example of adults going to great lengths to be the first to greet each other—including hiding and climbing through windows—see Sarah Jane B. Hill, "Christmas Gift," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 3:177–78.
40. For more on Christmas celebrations in agricultural European societies, see Nissenbaum, *Battle for Christmas*, 3–11.
41. Charles Kelly, ed., "Captain Francis Marion Bishop's Journal," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 15 (1947): 214. Though offended by his reception at the Kanab Christmas celebration, Bishop later returned to Utah and became a professor of natural science at the University of Deseret and opened an assay office on West Temple Street in Salt Lake City.

42. "Journal of Walter Clement Powell," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 16–17 (1948–49): 381–82.
43. "New Advertisements," *Deseret News*, December 22, 1858, 180.
44. "Merry Christmas," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1859, 340.
45. "Coming," *Deseret News*, December 25, 1867, 363.
46. Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 130.
47. "General Merchandise," *Deseret Evening News*, December 22, 1869, 541; "Christmas, 1870. Fresh Arrivals for the Holidays," *Deseret Evening News*, December 21, 1870, [2].
48. "Dunford and Sons," "Theodore Lubb," and "ZCMI," *Deseret Evening News*, December 21, 1870, [1], [2].
49. "New Advertisements," *Deseret News*, December 28, 1864, 104.
50. "ZCMI," *Deseret Evening News*, December 7, 1870, [2].
51. "Special Notices," *Deseret Evening News*, December 24, 1870, [2].
52. "Local and Other Matters, ZCMI," *Deseret Evening News*, December 24, 1870, [3]. In New York City, department stores like Macy's regularly stayed open until midnight on Christmas Eve by the 1860s. For more on how urban retailers catered to Christmas shoppers, see Restad, *Christmas in America*, 123–31.
53. "New Year's Gifts!! ZCMI," *Deseret Evening News*, December 31, 1870, [2].
54. "Christmas is Coming," *Deseret Evening News*, December 21, 1869, [3].
55. Lambson, "Christmas in Union Fort in 1861," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 2:123.
56. Sarah Bell Harris, "Christmas Memories," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 1:103.
57. "The Pioneers' First Christmas," 2:336. Clement Clarke Moore's "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" designated Santa's reindeer as Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen. Restad, *Christmas in America*, 47–48. Moore's authorship of the poem has recently been questioned in David D. Kirkpatrick, "Whose Jolly Old Elf Is That, Anyway?" *New York Times*, October 26, 2000, B1.
58. Lillie G. Barton, "How the Pioneers of Ephraim Celebrated Christmas," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 1:121.
59. Barton, "Pioneers of Ephraim," in Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 1:121. Expressing a religious faith in Santa Claus was not unique to Mormon children. Indeed, Leigh Eric Schmidt located a similar sensibility among American children generally. He writes that "St. Nicholas reemerged as a focus of real veneration; praying to him or through him became a recognized piety of Victorian childhood." Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 139. For more on Santa's connection with Jesus, see Restad, *Christmas in America*, 52–56.
60. C. H. White, "Echoes of the Sage and Cedar's Oak Creek," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 18:163–64.
61. "Their Friend," in Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 14:204.
62. Eliza R. Snow, "Santa Claus," *Juvenile Instructor*, Salt Lake City, December 15, 1868, 189.
63. "Christmas," *Deseret Evening News*, December 24, 1868, [2].