

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

A Look at Late 1960 Shows Changes, But Also Similarities

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The Christmas of 2008 carries an air of expectation that goes beyond wondering what Santa Claus is going to bring us this year. As we wait for next month's presidential inauguration, we also wonder what the new administration will have in store for us. The transition reminds us of another Christmas when a young president and his family waited to move into the White House. It seems like a good time to take a look at what the Addison County Independent had to say about the Christmas of 1960, at the dawn of the Kennedy era.

Vermont was still a largely Republican state in this era. The November newspapers showed that the Kennedy-Johnson ticket had not entirely written off this college town, for they took out a large photo ad with the slogan, "We Will Meet The Challenge!" Yet its size did not rival that of the two-page spread for the local Republican "MEN OF ACTION," including Ray Keyser for Governor, Ralph Foote for Lt. Governor and Robert Stafford for Congress. Their platform emphasized: "Peace with No Retreat! More Farm Markets! New Industry! Promote Recreation! Expand Education!" The Democratic team of Russell Niquette for Governor and Leonard Wilson for Lieutenant Governor, had a smaller ad, with the simple slogan, "NO SALES TAX."

The election results were published in a large table on the front page of the November 11 edition. Kennedy may have won the presidency, but Nixon beat him by nearly two-to-one in Addison County, 5524-2970. The Kennedy-Johnson ticket did not win a single county town, though they came closest in Vergennes, which went for Nixon 494 to 404. Republicans Stafford, Keyser and Foote all won handily.

The hotly-contested presidential contest attracted a record voter turnout of 83% in Middlebury, the paper reporting that this was testimony to the "activities of the Democrats who had worked for weeks, with an office and staff of aides, to increase the registration and get voters to the polls." It was noted that some people spent up to 45 minutes waiting to vote. In the end, the Democrats came up short, but their efforts probably helped to elect a Democrat, local shopkeeper Stan Lazarus, to the Middlebury Vermont House seat, and Democrats were also sent to Montpelier from Salisbury and Hancock.

The “By The Way” column reported that everyone was glad the election was over. “TV viewers can relax now. Their programs have been interrupted, cancelled, confused and blared forth political speeches and commercials for weeks. Even adults can enjoy westerns now it is hoped.” We can commiserate.

With Kennedy on the way to the White House, the disappointed locals turned their minds to Christmas. Contrary to our recollections, businesses did not wait until after Thanksgiving to start their Christmas advertising. As early as November 11, Patnode’s Red White Super Market was running a large ad telling of the “Wonderland of Gifts” you could buy with the Top Value Stamps given to you with each transaction. Twenty books of stamps could be redeemed for a Brownie movie camera or a baby doll could be had for only two books. At he National Bank of Middlebury, they were actively promoting saving for holiday expenses through their Christmas Club.

A Thanksgiving editorial in the November 25 edition reminded readers that the president might change, “but the problems themselves haven’t changed.” What would Kennedy have to face? “We must still deal with the Communists, the space race, farm situation, foreign affairs, race relations, labor relations, the need to prevent inflation and maintain a sound and expanding economy,” The editor worried that under the new Democratic administration, “Many Americans [would] cling with childlike trust to a belief that the federal government is best qualified to solve all problems and to provide the good life for all.” He concluded with an obscure Vermont admonition, “Don’t be so busy sawing wood that you don’t have time to sharpen the saw.”



Main Street Middlebury, c. 1960.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The economy was certainly stronger than it is today. The paper was full of huge ads for large American cars. How about that Chevy Impala sport sedan or maybe you’d like to get your family into a thrifty Rambler station wagon, now selling at Chipman Hill Rambler? And what about a new television? Gee’s Radio, Television Shop on Shannon Street had the new 23” Zenith for \$299.95. This was twice as much as the electric clothes dryer you could buy at

CVPS. (As Cartmell’s ad said, “SMART SANTA!...He’s giving her a new appliance!”) Farrell’s Men’s Shop was touting, “The most outstanding display of smart men’s wear this side of New York City.” The Grey Shop’s Gift Guide featured, “Lovable, kitten-soft

black and white Fun COLLARS [for] just \$1.00,” that looked disconcertingly like they might have been made of real kittens.

The intellectual crowd could stop by the Vermont Book Shop and pick up a copy of Out on a Limerick by Bennet Cerf or the biography Meet Calvin Coolidge: The Man Behind the Myth. (What was the Coolidge myth, exactly?) Kids might enjoy the new Dr. Seuss book, Green Eggs and Ham.

Most of the stores in downtown Middlebury seem to have been staying open until 9 p.m. as Christmas approached. Abram’s was having a big evening drawing, with a \$100 wardrobe as the Grand Prize. A 10% bonus was added if the winner was present. Afterwards, you could go home and celebrate with Palmer’s “Eggnog Dairy Drink,” prominently labeled in their ad as ‘non-alcoholic.

(As an aside, the December 9, 1960 issue has a front-page story commending a 15-year-old local boy, Scott Needham, for being chosen as chairman of the arrangements committee for the national Explorer Scout Jamboree, coming up in Massachusetts the following summer. Many of you know the wonderful job Scott does heading the Elderly Services College in Middlebury, but this proves his organizational abilities were spotted early!)

Turkeys were going for 39 cents a pound, with hams more expensive, at 59 cents. Local people who preferred to let someone else cook their Christmas dinner might get reservations at the Middlebury Inn, where you could start with a broiled half grapefruit, clear the palette with ‘Consomme Clair,’ then enjoy a roast Vermont turkey dinner with all the fixings for \$3.50, including dessert. The Dog Team and the Waybury were also doing great holiday business.

A white Christmas was forecast for Addison County in 1960. Children could meet Santa Claus on the Middlebury Green. Families might take in a movie at the Campus Theatre, the choices including H.G. Wells The Time Machine and Walt Disney’s Ten Who Dared. Record-breaking amounts of mail were being handled by the post office, but they promised that Parcel Post that came in would be delivered the same day until well into the evening. All the local churches were planning special Christmas services.

The last newspaper of the year showed that the local holiday had gone off without a hitch. Harriet Folsom of East Middlebury won the \$100 wardrobe at Abrams Department Store. A headline provides the reassuring news that, in Bristol, “Santa’s Suit Arrives In Nick Of Time,” to save the Odd Fellows Christmas party. Nancy Stratton Enos, the daughter of Middlebury College President Samuel Stratton, was married in Mead Chapel two days after Christmas. The Middlebury Inn was gearing up for New Year’s Eve, where the Lions Club invited the public to eat Steamship Round of Beef and dance until midnight for \$3.50 each.

Yet despite all the holiday cheer, there were murmurs of discontent as Vermont adjusted to the thought of the impending transition to the Democratic administration in Washington. On the editorial page, the headline read, “1961 Likely to Mean Higher Taxes.” The piece began with the hope that, “Applying young Jack Kennedy’s New Frontiers theme to Middlebury the year 1961 ought to produce a number of things that have been languishing for some time.” This was swiftly followed by worries about the cost: “Probably a public opinion poll would produce the fact that a majority of the town’s citizens would like to have taxes reduced in 1961.”

Prospects were looking good for the sewage disposal plant. The town should really “make some effort to establish building and fire codes.” The Town and Village boards needed to get their acts together, “because in a decade there’ll be a by-pass and it will take 10 years to acquire property.” And—guess what—“A second bridge across the Otter Creek is becoming more necessary each year.” With all of these improvements in the hopper in the Kennedy era, “The year 1961 is likely to see Middlebury topping the list of towns with the highest taxes.”

Three weeks later, on January 21, 1961, a young Democratic president would take the oath of office in Washington, D.C. About a third of the people back in Addison County were celebrating. But all local residents could take a special pride in the occasion when America’s great poet and our revered resident of Ripton, Robert Frost, stood before John F. Kennedy and the nation on the capitol steps. The sun on the snow created such a glare so that he could not read the poem he had composed for the occasion. Instead, the 87-year-old poet recited from memory his equally suitable composition, “The Gift Outright.” His voice grew strong as he began his homage to the settling of America, with its stirring opening. “The land was ours, before we were the land’s.”