

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Christmas

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Our daily lives are drifting quietly into the past, where they pile up like the deepening snows of winter. In the life stage that is euphemistically called 'mature' you can reconstruct a surprising the number of lost worlds from your own past, if you take the time. What was it like to live in 1940 or 1960 or, for a little while today, 1980?

One of the greatest joys of the Sheldon Museum is its continuous run of over two centuries of Middlebury newspapers. Pick a year, pull out the massive volume and read your way into that past time. The smell of newsprint, the typefaces, the drawings and photos immediately establish the mood of an era.

Let's go back thirty years, a time frame that seems pretty recent if you were there, yet long enough to grant us some perspective. It is 1980 and Christmas is fast approaching. In the *Addison Independent*, no mention is made of the impending holiday in the weeks right after Halloween. The first inkling comes in Thanksgiving week, with mention of a special on Hallmark Christmas cards at Park Drug on Main St.—40 cards for \$2.99. Cole Flowers and Frames announce their annual open house. Santa will be arriving at University Mall on the day after Thanksgiving. No one then living seems to have heard the ominous term, "black Friday."

By the next week, the turkey had been gobbled, the last buck of the season had been shot and Christmas anticipation was in full swing. On Sunday, December 7, the Middlebury Concert Choir, Middlebury Community Chorus and the Vermont Symphony Orchestra would be singing the Hallelujah Chorus and Scarlatti's Christmas Cantata, with Emory Fanning conducting.

The stores were gearing up for their busiest season. In Middlebury, the business association took a double page ad on December 3, featuring a big turkey promotion. Bring in the coupon with your name and address and you could win a 10-12 pounder. Participating stores read like a litany of local retail past: Abrams Department Store, Baker's Jewelry, Farrell's Men's Shop, Frog Alley Fabrics, Lazarus, Middlebury Hardware, Otter Creek Quilt Works, Park Drug, Vermont Drug and the Midd-Way Hobby Shop in the IGA Court St. Plaza. In Bristol, the Trading Post, Deerleap Furniture, Moynihan's and South Side Drug were participating.

Main Street Middlebury, c. 1980
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum



It is comforting to see a few still-familiar names: the Vermont Book Shop, Ben Franklin and the Skihaus, now reborn. Addison County's downtowns were filled with locally-owned businesses featuring necessities: drug stores, hardware stores, department stores with affordable clothes for the whole family. In Middlebury, there was a Montgomery Ward, Store Two, The Kitchen Shop and Middlebury Darkroom. Peter Hawke clothing and antiques was booming in the old mill in Frog Hollow, sharing the road with the booming Vermont State Craft Center.

Shopping was not normally a seven-day-a-week entertainment. Ames took a big ad saying that they were now open for special holiday hours from noon to 5 on Sundays. A number of stores selling women's clothing, Abrams and Skihaus among them, were running "Men's Night" promotions, where helpless males could get extra assistance in picking out gifts for the women in their lives. If a guy was lucky, he might run into another guy he knew at one of these and they could go to the Rosebud or the Alibi to recover over a beer.

For a quick snack, stop by Lyon's Place (now Middlebury Market) or pick up a sub at Emilio's (Otter Creek Bakery). The Lemon Fair had good diner food in the once and future Park Diner spot. It was never too cold for ice cream at Calvi's.

There were some good deals in the shops. Lazarus was selling pretty much everything, with men's Levi cords a steal at \$13.99. Farrell's had some nice flannel shirts for \$12.95. In Vergennes, Fishman's Department Store had some extra specials as the store celebrated its 75th anniversary, with the whole staff pictured in the paper in Victorian dress.

You might even want to spring for a car, with Shea's selling brand new Chevette's for \$4651. There seemed to be a lot of used Datsuns for sale. Wonder why? Or buy a new house! You could get a lovely 3-bedroom farmhouse in Bristol, recently renovated, for \$45,000. In Middlebury, a historic house in a prime location on South St. would set you back \$65,000. You'd better have tenure before you risk laying out that kind of money.

For entertainment, the wacky Goldie Hawn film, Private Benjamin, was playing downtown...week after week. The paper published the TV listings, so you wouldn't miss Archie Bunker's Place or M*A*S*H. There were a lot of televangelists on Sundays: Jimmy, Swaggart, Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Jerry Falwell, and Robert Schuller from the Crystal Cathedral. Wonder whatever happened to those guys...

Local children were getting very excited about Christmas. A newspaper contest featured some charming original drawings of Santa's elves. Little Leslie Smith at Quarry Hill School drew an elf with eyelashes half-way up her forehead, while Cornwall, kindergartener Rennie Peddie's elf was doing a sprightly elfin dance in front of a fireplace.

Santa made an early stop at the annual AFS luncheon, where a photo shows Jennifer and Chandler Perine sharing his lap. Other children were writing him letters that were published in the paper. At Shoreham Preschool, "Stefanie likes Baby Cry and Dry, It comes on TV all the time." Up in Lincoln, Chad Sumner, age 6, asked for a jack up jeep with spare tire, and thoughtfully warned Santa, "There is a surprise we made for you. We have a new Chimney. You would be better off coming in the door."

It wasn't all Christmas news. A front page photo, bearing the caption, "Down Go the Elms, showed yet another Dutch elm ravaged tree getting the chain saw treatment, this time in front of the Robert Cushman house on Court St.

The spirit of the season was inspiring many good works. The annual United Way campaign was rapidly approaching its goal of \$125,000. At the Middlebury Congregational Church, the Christmas Bazaar was coming together in the capable hands of Coreen Cushman. Photos show her, as well as Peggy Lyons decorating a mantle and Kirsten McEdward and Mabel Dutton preparing the apron table.

The November election was dragging into the holiday season. On the editorial page, Gerald McLaughlin devoted his, "Then and Now" column to the conclusion of the recent close race for U.S. Senate, which had Patrick Leahy winning his second term by a narrow 2755 votes over Republican Stewart Ledbetter. McLaughlin expressed his disgust that Ledbetter had demanded an expensive recount, given the margin, "When a candidate wins in Vermont by 1.1% of the more than 200,000 votes case, the defeated candidate knows, or should know, that [they] can't possibly pick up enough votes to reverse the unofficial decision." The Republican party brought in recount watchers from Virginia, who, "charged that Vermont's election machinery is under Democratic control." Leahy countered that more than 80% of Vermont's election officials were Republicans.

On the other side of the political spectrum, a Mister Ups ad trotted out a photo of Ronald Reagan and his son, Ron, who had stopped there for lunch during a visit to the college in 1975. The caption read, "During the Holidays, Make it MISTER UP'S for Your Special Out of Town Guests!"

A front page story featured the final report of a traffic study commissioned by the Downtown Middlebury Task Force. The Burlington firm they had hired recommended three traffic signals downtown: at Main and College, Main and Merchants Row and Main and Rte. 7. Reaction was mixed, and "one Task Force member asked facetiously if they had included in their study how many times voters in Middlebury had rejected traffic lights." The firm countered that, "construction of a second bridge might relieve congestion by rerouting through traffic to the point where the more drastic changes

would not be needed.”

Christmas Day 1980 dawned bitterly cold. It hit 25 below in South Lincoln and the whole county was locked in the frigid grip. Plumbers delayed their holiday dinners to deal with frozen pipes. In Vergennes, Ryan Plumbing went out on 55 calls over Dec. 25-26 and the whole crew was working 16 hour shifts. Dundon’s had 28 calls on Christmas Day in Middlebury. Local garages were jump starting dozens of vehicles so people could make it to Grandma’s house.

The holiday went off, despite the glitches. By December 31, the last Add Indy of the year showed that the sales were in full swing. White sale at Ben Franklin! Toys for half price at Aubuchon! 20% off parkas at Skihaus! Bundle up in your new parka and head to the Chipman Hill ski jump, where the MUHS and College ski teams were practicing for their next competitions.

The final editorial of 1980 stated that the biggest story of the year was the moose that wandered into downtown Middlebury in September. That incident sold a lot of papers. The recent restoration of the Pulp Mill Bridge was also noted as “a monument to sentiment and nostalgia.” The editor was generally positive about the restoration, but fretted that, “A quarter of a million dollars went into a structure which can’t carry firetrucks nor carriers of meaningful amounts of good and materials.” The piece concluded, “We love the bridge, too, but we venture to ask about that other bridge, the one we need to do all the things the covered bridge cannot do? Must we await some disaster in which half the town is isolated by blockage of the Main Street Bridge?”

Yes, dear editor, there is a Santa Claus. He exists in our hearts if we only believe in him and his goodness. He will see that the men, women and children of Addison County need to be protected from harm and he will send his elves to build us a second in-town bridge. In this magical time, with all of us working together, we will learn to believe!

Photo: *Main Street Middlebury*, Signs on the buildings read "Vermont Drugs," "Books Records," "Calvi's Since 1910." Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum.