

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Diary Give Details of Holiday Chores

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This article first appeared in the *Addison Independent* in December 2006. Reproduced with permission.

Susan Pinney Cushman did not have much time to write in her diary during the Christmas season, because she was too busy cooking and cleaning. In her house at the head of Washington St. (later moved to Seminary St. Extension and now home to Karl and Diane Neuse), she wrote a quick note each year describing her holiday preparations. On Christmas Day 1867, she “Baked a chicken pie.” In 1872, she “baked a turkey” and “cleaned up in general.” In other years, we get her whole menu: “Baked bread mince and cream pies. Baked chickens and prepared turkey for the oven, fixed cranberries.” In case this wasn’t heavy enough, when she had the time she usually mentioned that she also “fried doughnuts.” As everything was cooking, she regularly mentioned having swept, dusted, tidied, polished her silver and cleaned the china cupboard.

The season could take its toll on a woman with a large family. Susan had a husband, Horace, who worked as carpenter and custodian for the Addison County Grammar School and the Congregational Church. There were four children: Emma, now married to Charles Wainwright and living off in Lawrence, Massachusetts, William, Oscar and Edward. The boys all stayed in Middlebury and started their own families. It is not surprising that Susan’s diaries start when they are grown, for by then she could snatch a few moments to write when she wasn’t hosting large family gatherings.

Christmas was a time then, as now, when a mother missed those grown children who were far away. Most years found Susan yearning for her distant daughter at the holidays: “We all went to Eddie’s to supper had a Christmas Tree some very nice presents how I wish Emma’s family were here.” “How nice it would be if Emma and her family could be with us.” In 1885, “Children and grandchildren all home to dinner all but Emmas family we wished so many times they were here.”

Death was never far away in the nineteenth century, and holidays were often a time when people mused on their mortality and counted their blessings: “[December 25, 1867] Christmas day pretty lovely, too different from what it used to be when we could all be together. Probably we never shall be again. Oh! I wish we could, but no one has gone to his long home...beside father he left us long years ago.” “[December 25, 1884] It has been beautiful and we have all been very happy. Hope we may all be spared to another Christmas.” Holiday happiness always came with a nagging sense of worry:

“Children and grandchildren all here to dinner. I hope and pray we may all be spared till many more returns of this day.” By 1898, she was writing, “Not a very happy Christmas—too many died ones to think about.”

Susan displayed the selflessness that was expected of mothers in her era, but in the privacy of her diary she could hint that the holidays were taking their toll. After a long list of household tasks on Christmas Eve 1887, she confided, “Am dreadful tired tonight.” A decade later and things were no better: “Baked cream mince and cherry pies fried plain doughnuts very tired.” The only year that seems to have been an exception was 1891, when she was able to take it easy, writing that it was, “Rather a lovely Christmas. The first in 20 years I have not made a large dinner.”

Then, as now, there were Christmas presents, some purchased and some homemade. On Christmas Eve of 1878, “Made some presents for the boys, went down town in afternoon.” Gifts were not central to Susan’s enjoyment of the holiday, but she occasionally recorded something special. On Christmas 1877 there was a big surprise after church: “When I came home tonight I found a nice new carpet on my parlor floor.” Another year, “The children gave father and I a very nice easy chair.” Emma sent boxes of fruit and, in one special year, a china tea set. A friend named Bennie Sherwood gave her a “little present” in 1887, which made her think, “Tis pleasant to be remembered.” Yearly journals were popular Christmas gifts, and the books in which Susan wrote often came as presents from family members. Inside the front cover of her journal of 1883, scrawled in a childish hand, are the words, “From Earl to Grandma.”

Susan’s diaries give us a chance to share the life of a successful wife and mother in an earlier Middlebury. Like the lives of millions of women, hers revolved around the routines of cleaning, cooking, sewing and caring for an ever-expanding family circle. The love she felt for them comes through clearly, as she wrote her accounts of the long hours she toiled to make their Christmases special. In the midst of the hubbub, she snatched some precious time to reflect on her experiences.

The Sheldon Museum’s Research Center gives a permanent home to many journals filled with holiday memories like Susan Cushman’s. Over two hundred years of Christmases past can be found in our archives. It is a privilege to have these glimpses into the work, play, stress and love of the holidays, as families enjoyed their traditions and reinforced their bonds. Best wishes to you all in the holiday season of 2006.

A visit to the Sheldon Museum is a family tradition for many people in our region. The historic house is decorated, the big train set is running and there are fun activities in the children’s room. We are open for our usual hours, if you’d like to bring in visiting family and friends.