

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Old Newspapers Offer Look into Lives of County Citizens

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The local Rotarians recently gave me the fun assignment of looking into how people here have celebrated the New Year in the past. At the Sheldon Museum, we are lucky enough to have the only full run of Middlebury newspapers, and they served as a wonderful source for answering this question.

Small town newspapers from the early 1800s carried very little local news, relying on reprinting stories from big city papers. We do not see a lot of local reporting until after the Civil War.

I began my quest in the 1870s, when each of Addison County's towns had its own reporter filing news of their citizens' activities for every edition of the paper. Cold winter nights offered time for social events that were impossible to arrange in months with heavier work loads. On December 27, 1877, according to the Addison County Journal, "The young people of the [Middlebury] Episcopal Church are to be treated to a shadow pantomime this evening," adding the contradictory remark that it was, "Free to all for the sum of ten cents." For others, that 3 p.m. meeting of the local chapter of the Juvenile Temperance League might be more their cup of tea.

Middlebury's reporter also noted that, "Dances are always in order at this time, and the young people are taking the opportunity to enjoy themselves. Monday night there was one at Pierce's. Tuesday night one at Partch's in New Haven and at Farr's, East Middlebury." Extraordinarily, the famous English critic, John Ruskin, was quoted to local effect, "Mr. Ruskin, the great authority on art, recently said that "precise dancing" was the safeguard of morality. Middlebury and vicinity is pretty well guarded according to that, although what he means by "precise" dancing is uncertain." (In other words, we don't know what it is, but we're pretty sure we aren't doing it).

A funny story also appears in this paper, concerning one of the town's youthful swains. "A young man came into one of our barber shops the other day and wanted his mustache and side-whiskers colored. We do not know but that is all right enough, but when he wanted to pay the barber in cabbages the barber says, "Guess not."

In those days before global warming, many winter activities involved the ice. Skating parties are often mentioned, like the one in Weybridge in 1877, "There is fine skating on Brittell's pond, where several of the young people celebrated Christmas." In Bridport, "A practice game of baseball was played on skates on the pond on New Year's day. The score stood 11 to 13 for four innings."

Ice also meant work. On January 10, 1878, “Ice cutting has commenced on the creek above the bridge by B. Fleming and below the old paper mill by James Burus. It is of very fair quality and about a foot thick.”

Even before central heating, Vermonters were giddy to see a snowfall. In 1878, “The first snow of the season was greeted with even more enthusiasm than usual, on account probably of the lateness in the season. Mr. Rider was out with a four-horse team and treated his boarders to a sleigh ride.”

Entertainers often came through the county on these long winter nights, but you couldn’t always trust that they were what they seemed. In Middlebury in 1878, it was reported that, “W.E. Rogers, advertising himself as a “converted comedian,” who was in this vicinity a short time ago, giving one of his temperance lectures in the Methodist church in the village and also at East Middlebury, proves to be an impostor. The pastor of the Methodist church in Schenectady, N.Y. with which Rogers claimed membership, in reply to a letter of enquiry, says, “I am tired answering letters about the scamp; he is a liar and a hypocrite.”

Stores and government offices had traditionally been open on Christmas and New Year’s Day, out of deference to the anti-Christmas biases of old New England. By the 1890s, this pattern was starting to change. Businesses were beginning to curtail their hours on January 1, for a notice in the paper said, “The post-office will be open on New Year’s day only from 7 to 10 a.m. and from 4 to 6:30 p.m.”

The end of 1894 saw a big development in Middlebury, when “Electric lights have lately been placed in the bank and in several private residences.”

There is evidence of the increasing commercialization of the holidays. The Christmas and New Year advertisements were fairly small and discrete in the 1800s, but by 1910 they had become larger and more emphatic. January was now becoming a big time for pre-inventory clearance sales. Cushman’s Store ran a huge ad for its big sale: 65¢ sweaters were now only 49¢! \$1 corsets were going for 69¢! Men’s suits now sold for \$12.98!”



The dancing continued, with the new tradition of a Fireman’s Ball held on New Year’s Eve at the Town Hall—now Town Hall Theater. The January 4, 1924 edition of the Middlebury Register reported that, “Over 100 couples danced the New Year in at the Town hall

Middlebury Town Hall 1880 – 1920. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

Tuesday morning, as a conclusion to one of the most enjoyable dances ever given by the Middlebury Fire department.”

The story made the front page, along with a major ‘crime’ that occurred on this occasion. Under the gripping headline, “Missing Coat Returned to Ben,” it was reported that when young Ben Rogers went to put on his new sheepskin coat for the cold ride home from the Fireman’s Ball, it was found to have disappeared. The Fire Chief made an announcement to this effect from the stage, and by the next morning the offender had dropped the coat outside the Fire Chief’s door and made his getaway. Whew! Front page news! (We now put these stories in the middle pages.)

By the 1930s, new technologies were coming to dominate social life during the holiday season. The newspapers were full of ads for all the latest movies. The Middlebury Register of January 1, 1931 announced that a new blockbuster, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, would be opening at Holley Hall in Bristol on January 5. A year later, Middlebury’s Opera House was showing “the 4 Marx Brothers” in *Monkey Business*.

If you would rather stay home, you could spend your evening listening to the radio. These amazing instruments did not come cheap. In 1931, the ads show that the new Victor Radios cost \$112.50, while the deluxe Sparton Radio would set you back \$280.

The most heartening thing about these holiday accounts is to realize that we haven’t really changed all that much. Families still feast together, kids like to go skating, we haul our turkey-stuffed selves off to the movies and come home to wonder what the new year will have in store.

And the new year brings the need for a reminder, like this one paraphrased from the *Addison County Journal*, “When you write a letter now don’t forget that 7 is the last figure in the date line.” So, here’s wishing everyone a Happy 200...7.