

The St. Olaf Christmas Festival Tour Guide

By Jeff Sauve



“Twenty thousand meatballs are served annually. Seriously!” I mentioned this culinary tidbit — and one or two others — to my son, Bailey, as we waited for the brief shuttle-bus ride across campus from Buntrock Commons to Skoglund Athletic Center

where the annual Christmas Festival concert would be held. The evening had been building up to the much anticipated concert. Many of us on the shuttle had just enjoyed the fine repast of the Christmas Festival’s traditional smorgasbord, complete with my favorites, herring and lefse. By the looks of it, a few Norwegian cardigans tested the holding power of their pewter buttons.

The bus, dimly lit as it was, did not hide the curious eyes of many of the passengers as they regarded me. Before it pulled away from the curb, I introduced myself and said, “Say, folks, as long as we have several minutes let me tell you a couple of stories about the Christmas Festival.” With a captive and warm audience, harbored from the arctic temperatures and swirling snow outside, I launched into the following *festoids* without hesitation:

The 1916 Christmas Festival concert was cancelled and classes dismissed at the last minute due to the possibility of a scarlet fever outbreak. The Minnesota State Board of Health chastised St. Olaf President Lauritz Vigness for not seeking its approval for dismissal. Two years later, the event was again cancelled by President Lars Boe when the Spanish Influenza raged on campus and four students died.

The 1930 Christmas Festival concert was held in the old gymnasium (now the Theatre Building). A lack of funds limited the set decorations so students worked with two tall, skinny fir trees

and placed them on either side of the stage. Two- and- one-half inch stars were cut from worn out, stiffly starched cotton sheets, and revolving color wheels were placed at the base of each tree for illumination.

In 1986, former U.S. President Richard Nixon wrote a thoughtful letter to St. Olaf President Melvin George after viewing the PBS-televised Christmas Festival concert. His letter said, in part, “In these days when there is so much trivial trash on TV it was heartwarming and inspirational to listen to the fine music. ... All who were fortunate enough to hear the program are in your debt.”

One tradition that has fallen out of favor is the illumination of Mellby Hall’s windows. Reminiscent of an 1878 tradition of illuminating Old Main, which ended in the early 1920s, the women of Mellby Hall revived the tradition in 1938 and continued the practice through the mid-1950s, placing candles in the dorm windows each night during the Christmas Festival.

One Ole family liked to park the family car beneath the open gymnasium windows. Bundled in blankets and dressed in snowsuits, the family rolled down their car windows and listened to the magic wielded by F. Melius Christiansen

as the night stars glistened above.

Since 1954 when NBC radio first broadcast the Christmas Festival nationwide, those with otherwise no connection to the college have been moved by the worship service, listening on the radio or, later, on public television. One gentleman who keenly felt the loss of his spirituality when his beloved wife passed away found solace in the 2007 Christmas Festival concert that aired on PBS. He wrote to the St. Olaf Music Department,

“Thank you for providing me with a hint of hope, a hint of peace, and a hint of love I thought had been buried with my wife.” 🦁



Inspecting set designs for the 1946 Christmas Festival.



The 1933 Christmas Festival was held in the old gymnasium, which is now the Theatre Building.



John Ferguson directs the massed choirs and the St. Olaf Orchestra in 2008.

In 2012, the St. Olaf Christmas Festival will celebrate its centennial anniversary. Looking ahead to that occasion, the Shaw-Olson Center for College History is seeking anecdotes and recollections related to performing or attending the Christmas Festival. Selected submissions may be used for publication. Please contact associate archivist Jeff Sauve at sauve@stolaf.edu.