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Once upon a time, when Christmas was a workday

BY CONNIE ZEIGLER

WITH THANKSGIVING BEHIND US, THE CHRISTMAS holiday will soon be upon us. The world's largest, not-a-Christmas-tree (the Soldiers and Sailors Monument) will

be bedecked and lighted. Mass Ave is about to hold its annual Holiday Hoopla and merchants from everywhere near and far from the Circle are hoping the shopping season won't be a financial fiasco.

In years past, however, the holiday was a much simpler and less ballyhooed occasion.

When the city was young, back in 1832, our pioneer assemblymen were even in session on Christmas Day. Calvin Fletcher reported attending to business with the General Assembly on the morning of Dec. 25 before joining the local Presbyterian minister, his wife, his law partners, family members and others for a Christmas dinner. This small gathering at the end of a working day was probably a scene repeated across the city among its approximately 1,900 residents.

Twenty-two years later – on a snowy Christmas Day in 1854 – a group of teachers spent their holiday organizing an association that would become far more powerful than any of them must have dreamed. The 175 men and women who spent their Christmas listening to educators speak on topics such as “The Importance of the Civil Polity as a Branch of Common School Education,” later pledged their one-dollar dues (only 50 cents for women teachers) to establish the Indiana State Teachers Association. Now a powerful lobbying organization, ISTA began that year, according to a history of the association, as a group to agitate for free schools for all Indiana children.

Christmas was a holiday that developed slowly in the U.S. The “Encyclopedia of Indianapolis” reports that Indiana did not make it a legal holiday until 1875. In 1895, a young Claude Bowers wrote in his diary that he and his mother celebrated the holiday with dinner at the Bates House (once on the corner of Illinois and Washington streets) and then went to English's Opera House (once on the northwest quarter of the Circle) to see a play called “The Sporting Duchess.” By the 1890s, gift-giving was becoming common. Claude reported only one gift in his diary, a book called “The Workers” given to him by a friend. The



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following year, Bowers gave a Christmas speech at the Methodist church in Whitestown, Indiana. One of the attendees pronounced that Claude's speechifying was so stirring he would probably be president one day. Although he didn't rise quite so high, Claude Bowers did eventually serve as U.S. ambassador to both Spain and Chile, spending many Christmases in foreign lands.

By the early 20th century, Indianapolis Downtown retail establishments were decorating their windows with the same type of elaborate holiday displays that became famous in New York and Chicago. Apparently one Charles Mayer and Co. Christmas display featured a sledding scene with a tiny painted wooden sled advertising the store's name. (One of my friends found that sled in a Downtown alley several years ago, and it's now on display in my Fountain Square home.)

During the Great Depression, the Real Silk Hosiery Mills' company newsletter reported that workers who saved 50 cents a week would have saved \$25.50 to spend on gifts come Christmas 1932, and that money mattered “more than ever” in the financially stressed years of the Depression. To celebrate the holiday, the mill closed for Christmas giving the “girls” in the hosiery factory a much-needed respite from work.

Toward the end of the 1930s, architect Edward D. Pierre was one of the first to propose adding lights and other decorations to the Circle to elevate the holiday spirit – and to increase holiday shopping, no doubt. (Almost three decades, Pierre would play a role in the formation of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, as well as in the earliest restoration efforts of Lockerbie Square.)

Between the Circle decorations and the holiday windows, Downtown Indianapolis became a location that charmed residents from all over the state. The L.S. Ayres cherub appeared each Christmas as if by magic, and for decades stores vied with each other to create the jolliest, happiest, most sugar-coatedest windows of them all. I remember the annual drive to “the City”

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from Greensburg as a hallmark of the season for my family in the 1960s. Walking around the Circle and along Washington Street, where many of the store windows had animated displays, was magical.

Adding lights to the Soldiers and Sailors Monument began in 1962. Although from my perspective this practice makes the monument look more like a tacky Maypole than a reverent monument to the Civil War, flipping the switch on the “Circle of Lights” has become the annual initiation to the holiday season in Indianapolis and is now a long-standing tradition of its own. Historians love traditions. But, as we approach the holiday it might be worth considering that over the years Indianapolis has celebrated Christmas in myriad ways, magical and tacky, large and small. And sometimes just by showing up for work. ■

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