

Palmer Historical Society

Christmas 2013

Holiday Greetings to members and friends of the Palmer Historical Society! We've opened wide our e-newsletter offering - free of charge - to folks interested in Valley History, reconnecting with long-ago friends and acquaintances, who've lived here or visited, or who wish to visit again, and again, and again (if only from the easy chair.)

We invite you to participate in Colony Christmas festivities, December 13-15. If you'd like information and a schedule of events, please see: palmerchamber.net/events/colony-christmas.html Of keen interest to us is the *Colony Museum Open House*. (316 E. Elmwood, across from Colony Inn.) She will be dressed in her Christmas finery, open free to the public on Saturday, December 14 from 10 am to 6 pm. There will be hot drinks, Christmas treats, and caroling around the Colony piano. Barb Lentz Thomas and her merry band of docents, including Carol Lombardo (archivist), will respond to questions about the Matanuska Colony, pointing out artifacts carefully preserved from the period. Our Baking Elves will bring goodies to munch and sip, and plates of delicacies piled high for our annual fundraising Bake Sale. How can you resist?

As Gerry Keeling ended her last newsletter message, "May the season treat you gently and bring blessings your way!" (Unfortunately, that line was cut off.) The words touched home as, more often than not, other mantras seem synonymous with the holiday season: commercialism, expense, stress, family strife, homesickness, loneliness, depression...

May we, then, also wish that the season treat you gently and that blessings along the way be recognized and appreciated.

Happy Holidays to all. ~ Your PHS Board of Directors and Helpers ~



Photo by Barbara Hecker

An Appeal for Contributions

Fret Not Themselves... *this is not an appeal for money.*

Given the new newsletter format includes more open space, we'd enjoy hearing from you on YOUR recollections of the Matanuska Valley. Here are themes for future editions to mull and, hopefully, share (a few sentences, a paragraph, a short story if you can whittle it to 300 words...)

*January edition
February edition
March edition
April edition*

*Due by December 30
Due by February 3
Due by March 3
Due by March 31*

*Long. Hard. Winter.
Valley Center Theater
Brown. Silt. Wind.
Hope. Preparations. Light.*

Please don't stress over perfection—spelling, grammar, or otherwise. We'll edit.

*Please feel free to share this e-newsletter with others who may be interested. Anyone may be added to the subscriptions list by emailing <blhecker@mtaonline.net> or by messaging our Facebook page (search 'Palmer Historical Society Alaska')
Want to opt out? Reply and write "UNSUBSCRIBE" in the Subject line. Thank you! Enjoy!*

Our First Palmer Christmas, 1935

Contributed by Bob Graham

Gazing at the glowing 'embers' of a modern gas fire, I saw a vision: 1935, roaring wood flames through the door of a 100-gallon barrel stove.

We were not colonists. My father, Bruce, was working his first valley job as a maintenance man at various saw mills. Financed by small savings from the sale of his fishing boat and logging jobs in South-eastern Alaska, he'd purchased three acres from M. D. Snodgrass. Dad finished a tent frame with a wood floor. It was just like those lined up west of the Palmer train depot. It would become our new home by August so I could begin the first grade at the new Palmer Territorial School.

Dad secured a machinist job at the new Matanuska Colony repair shop. My mother Margaret had the latest Sears mail-order white gas stove and gleaming new sheet linoleum on the floor. She was wondrously happy to be out of that musty old log cabin in Anchorage. The weather was just starting to get chilly. Snow already capped Byers Peak.

As the Matanuska Wind screamed south over the glacier, ice crystals formed on interior tent walls. From our bunk beds, my sister Virginia and I gazed in wonder at the ceiling nails, now in frosted, jewel-like relief. Thin canvas walls vibrated and bounced rending percussion to the heat-draining chill. As November temperatures plummeted, the converted barrel stove burned truckloads of scrap wood Dad had gleaned from camp sawmills.

"Christmas Mom" kicked into full gear as December appeared on the calendar. Wood surfaces, newly painted white, appeared as though another lantern had been lit. Construction paper, food coloring, and glue made of flour and water were the essence of "mother magic." Strips of red and green paper formed long chains for the tree. Pre-used aluminum foil transformed into glimmering stars. Strings of popcorn, dipped in bright food coloring, were hung everywhere to dry. Snowflakes were transformed from paper folded in quarters, then eighths, then cut with scissors almost too big for our little hands.

I recall the thrill of Mom's food preparation nearly equaling the festive meal itself. What dish to prepare and how to best showcase it on the table? Presentation meant a great deal to Mom. The main course was stuffed and roasted wild goose, complemented by moose tenderloin and a curious Jell-O salad. Dad produced his stash of Hudson Bay for hot buttered rum—mixed with flourish and teasing (as Dad always put too much rum in Mom's cup.) Ginny and I mixed especially thick Hershey Cocoa with lots of cream and a sprinkle of cinnamon or nutmeg.

I do not have the slightest recollection of the gift exchange. The memories are of the weeks of preparation. The next day everything was packed, Christmas was over. Clean up. Clean out. Move on with life.

Radiance from a contemporary (and work free) gas fireplace took me back decades to Christmases past. Yet, the warmth of 1935's Christmas will stay with me forever.

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A Kids' Christmas at the Center Theater

Contributed by Donn J. Moyer

Al Hagan, owner and operator of the Valley Center Theater in Palmer, annually hosted and funded a free Christmas Kids party, complete with cartoons, goodies, and a visit from Santa himself.

One particular Christmas stands out when everything that could go wrong, did. A cabin 'set' was constructed with hinges so that its walls would open disclosing a homey scene with fireplace, rocking chair and picture on the wall. "Santa," U.S. Marshall Bill Bouwens, fittingly weighed in at about 300 lbs.



Photo by Barbara Hecker
Colony House Christmas 2012

During a cartoon, we planned to ring sleigh bells over the sound system. I would "contact Santa by radio" (through the speakers) and announce that a sleigh, pulled by 8 reindeer, was sighted. Bells chiming, Al would cut the cartoon and shine a spotlight atop the cabin's roof where Santa would appear. Two elves would open the sides of the set exposing Santa as he "came down the chimney."

I escorted Marshall Bouwens through a hidden side door. Leading Bill by the hand, I guided him through a maze of pipes and timbers in an unfinished basement storage area. It was pitch black. I can't imagine why, as an usher, I didn't have a flashlight. Waving my other hand side to side in front of me to avoid the timbers, I still managed to walk into a pole, bloodying my nose in the process.

Hefting Santa's bulk 4' up to the theatre door via a milk crate 'step' was quite a task for this 98 lb. usher, popcorn popper and gum scraper. Finally, I boosted him through the opening. He began to climb the chimney. Said chimney, reinforced by 2X4's, created a ladder. Halfway there, Santa's heavy black belt caught on a spike. At the proper moment, the theatre went dark, Al turned the spotlight to the chimney so the kids would see Santa's descent. Meanwhile I was trying frantically to get Bill unhooked from the spike. Undoing the belt was the only solution. Santa was sweating, panting and muttering the most un-Christmas of phrases. In the end, Al brought up the house lights and Santa walked *around* the set. The hinged walls, which worked perfectly in rehearsal, wouldn't open.

The day was a monumental disaster. This Christmas party wasn't what we'd hoped it would be. The kids, none the wiser, were thrilled with Santa's visit, the goodies, and an afternoon of cartoons. (I'm sure parents were just as thrilled that it was not only free, but freed them to prepare elsewhere.) Marshall Bill Bouwens wonderfully played the role of Santa.

With Al Hagan, that was sort of the way things went. Yet I cannot deny my contributions to such misadventures.

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