

It was a white Christmas 100 years ago

One hundred years ago, Dec. 24, 1915, a foot or more of snow fell on Bloomington-Normal, making it a white Christmas worthy of Bing Crosby and Irving Berlin.

In many ways, the 1915 holiday season wasn't all that different from the one we experience today. "The local merchants will keep their stores and shops open every night this week and these mercantile emporiums, ablaze with color and light of varied hue, gaily bedecked with multitudes of Christmas offerings, crowded to the doors with holiday shoppers, will present an animated scene," observed a rather loquacious Pantagraph reporter four days before Christmas Eve.

And much like today, Bloomington-Normal attracted folks from the surrounding towns and countryside looking to spend a few hours or a whole day holiday shopping in the "big city." One significant difference from then and now, however, is that downtown Bloomington has since been deposed as the retail heart of the Twin Cities by the malls and big box stores strung along Veterans Parkway.

Back in 1915, local railroad and interurban ticket agents anticipated record sales as farm families and small town residents prepared to descend on downtown Bloomington. They came here to buy things such as Victrola phonograph players at the discount retailer My Store; men's smoking jackets, fur caps and mufflers at Costello & O'Malley's; Tinker Toy sets at W.B. Read & Co.; and mahogany sewing tables at Kirkpatrick's.

This was the second holiday season with Europe aflame. Although the U.S. would not enter the First World War until the spring of 1917, the conflict loomed large in the American consciousness. During the 1915 Christmas season Bloomington residents Emily Gassette and her daughter Grace were serving as nurses at an Allied hospital in Paris, France. "There is something so indescribably and appallingly fearful about this warfare that its effect mentally upon the soldiers are such as to make them unwilling to dwell upon its horrors," Emily Gassette wrote back home in a letter published in the Dec. 22 Pantagraph.

In an era before the creation of a government social safety net, hunger, privation, sickness and squalor were shockingly common in Bloomington's poorer corners. In 1915, the Bloomington lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks saw to the distribution of some 125 food baskets and 25 tons of coal to hard luck local families. The Elks received heart-wrenching letters from those in need, including a destitute mother of six whose husband had died earlier in the month of tuberculosis.

The City of Bloomington sheltered jobless, itinerant men in what was called the "tramp house." In the month of December 1915 alone, more than 200 men spent time at this makeshift shelter. There were also Salvation Army fundraising kettles in 1915, but there were only three in use in Bloomington, and they were all on the courthouse square.

Although the automobile was beginning to make inroads on Bloomington streets, people and goods were still commonly transported by wagon and carriage. On Friday, Dec. 17, with area streets and roadways coated in ice, Bloomington's 16 horseshoeing shops were kept busy from open to close. "In a number of places horses were found eight and ten in a row, waiting to be shod, and to receive their Christmas shoes," noted The Pantagraph.

To the consternation of teamsters, carriage drivers and others, the slick streets were ideal for the youthful sport of "hooking." This activity involved the city's more exuberant lads hooking their slides onto the back of horse-pulled conveyances for a joyride.

By Dec. 20, four inches of ice covered Miller Park lake, two inches short of the requisite depth for safe skating. Even so, with a stretch of cold weather in the forecast area skaters were busy sharpening the edges of their "irons" in anticipation.

On Dec. 21, the Bloomington Post Office experienced one of the single heaviest days of mail handling in its history—at least up to that time. "All of the available extra clerks were pressed into service and even then the force was swamped," reported The Pantagraph. Mail wagons made repeated trips to the train depots to pick up and drop off everything from postcards to bulky packages (railroads once transported most of nation's mail). The local post office also pressed into service a new-fangled "automobile truck" to assist the wagon teams straining under the crush of mail.

Christmas Eve brought the biggest snow of the year, with 15 to 18 inches of the white stuff on the ground by the late evening. The Bloomington & Normal Railway & Light Co. called in every employee in a vain attempt to keep its streetcar lines open. A track sweeper and scraper ran all night but the heavy snow still played havoc with service.

Despite the weather, some folks had little choice but to make it downtown for some last minute shopping. "There was a surprisingly large number of the 'tried and true' who defied the fury of the 'Storm King' and waded through mountains of snow to invade the shops and stores," observed The Pantagraph.

Christmas was also observed at the Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home, the state-run orphanage in north Normal which in 1915 cared for about 400 boys and girls. The local chapter of United Spanish War Veterans played Santa to these orphans by distributing board games, sporting equipment and other fun stuff to each residential cottage. And on Christmas night the "inmates" (as the children were often called in state reports and the local press) were treated to a turkey dinner.