

## **Christmas dinner tradition at county jail**

“Unfortunate souls who spend Christmas Day in the county jail will at least have a tasty dinner to help them mull over their predicament,” noted the Dec. 25, 1945 Pantagraph.

Indeed, McLean County Sheriff Earl Richard oversaw a holiday meal of “baked chicken and sage dressing, mashed and sweet potatoes, creamed corn, scalloped oysters, celery, cranberry sauce and hot rolls.”

There were only seven prisoners “lolling” about their cells that Christmas Eve morning 71 years ago. Jailers, though, knew from experience that more than few of their fellow citizens were bound to overdo it with the “Yule cheer” and end up at the county clink before the first course of the big meal was served at noon Christmas Day.

Some of more festive holiday meals for local prisoners were held in the first half of the 20th century at the old county jail that immediately predated the McLean County Detention Facility (as the current jail is called).

Many longtime area residents will remember this jail (see accompanying image), located at the corner of Madison and Monroe streets on the west end of downtown Bloomington. Completed in 1882 as the fifth jail in the county’s history, it remained open a remarkable 95 years, finally closing on March 1, 1977.

For many years, until the county employed a jail cook, the sheriff’s wife normally handled the Christmas meals. In 1900, for example, Sheriff George Johnson’s spouse Carrie prepared a turkey dinner for 31 prisoners. The Johnsons also gave each inmate a Christmas card, handkerchief, candy, nuts and popcorn.

Either turkey or chicken (the latter baked, roasted or sometimes fried) was usually the main entree, though it was roast pork in 1912, along with “sage dressing, cranberries, celery, potatoes, bread, butter and apples in large quantities.” During this Christmas meal, reported The Pantagraph, prisoners “ate heartily, paced in and around the corridors and chatted among themselves of the significance of the day and the pleasures which were being enjoyed by the outer world.”

One inmate, though, kept to herself. Mae Gottschalk, held by the grand jury for the murder of her husband George, “sat quietly in the women’s ward and waited for the dusk, when she could again go to sleep.”

On Christmas Day 1915, there were 52 inmates in the county jail, including several federal prisoners from Springfield and five women. They were treated to fried chicken—of the “young and tender variety”—and many all-American sides. In addition, most male inmates received a “few Havanas” (cigars), while those that did not smoke were given “plug cut” (chewing tobacco).

The afternoon that year included a “moving picture show” program featuring a four-part drama and a closing comedy. Roy Strain and his wife brought in a Victrola and some phonograph records to provide musical accompaniment to the silent shorts.

In its Christmas Day reporting, The Pantagraph often grouped the county jail with other public and charitable institutions. Thus accounts of prisoner meals appeared alongside those from the Illinois Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s School, the McLean County Poor Farm, the McLean County Home for Colored Children and other such places.

As one would expect, this coverage could be a tad condescending, moralizing, saccharine and self-congratulatory (look how wonderfully humane our jail is!) That said, such attention was also an expression of genuine concern for the welfare of local prisoners—albeit if only for one day out of the year.

On Dec. 26, 1923, The Pantagraph published a letter from county inmate Robert Payne thanking Jennie “Mother Morrison,” wife of Sheriff J.E. Morrison, for a Christmas dinner of chicken, all the “fixins,” homemade mince pie and fruit cake. “We all know that there is always much merrymaking and good wishes going the rounds at this, our yuletide season,” Payne wrote, “and there are, undoubtedly, unfortunate persons here and there who have been overlooked, but I want to say that there is not one [inmate] who has been forgotten by the ‘mother’ of the county jail, Mrs. J.E. Morrison, who has labored untiringly that the inmates might have a merry Christmas with a feast and presents.”

Whether Payne wrote this letter of his own volition or at the “suggestion” of a jailer is unknown, though the effusive praise for Jennie Morrison leads one to suspect this was a heartfelt effort without hint of coercion.

On Christmas Eve 1925, Sheriff Morrison treated the inmates to a Victrola concert and a performance by Chicago baritone Frederick Bethel. A nephew of Sheriff Morrison, Bethel was in town with a traveling theater company performing the operetta “The Student Prince.” And Charlotte Morison, the young daughter of Deputy Sheriff Ike Morrison, played Santa by distributing candy, nuts and tobacco to the inmates. Christmas featured a roast chicken dinner in the afternoon and an oyster supper later in the evening

Two years later at the county jail, the highlights of Christmas Day 1927 included a chicken dinner, caroling and a service led by local evangelist Billy Shelper, founder of Home Sweet Home Mission.

A few days earlier, a Pantagraph reporter paid a visit to the jail and talked to one of the prisoners. "And Christmas, what does it mean to all of you?" asked the reporter. "It means a good 'feed,' which the sheriff has promised us," replied the inmate. "It means, too, a special celebration among ourselves, with songs by our 'choir' and an impromptu program some time during the day. Christmas, you know, gets celebrated inside a jail, as well as out, and whether one has friends outside who remember or not, doesn't keep the men with whom you spend it, from sharing what they receive."

Today, Christmas Day 2016, McLean County Jail inmates will enjoy a turkey dinner. County officials expect to serve about 210 men and women.

The day after Christmas 1926, a prisoner called a Pantagraph reporter to his cell, asking that he publish a thank you letter on behalf of those currently jailed. The anonymous letter noted the "culinary efforts" of June Nierstheimer (wife of Sheriff Walter Nierstheimer) and Hattie Boyer, the county jail "matron."

"Their Christmas Day achievements have put to shame some of the country's finest chefs," the letter read. The baked chicken dinner and sides were "all served in generous portions and prepared in a manner that carried us back in thought, to Mother's Christmas dinners."

"These recollections," added the prisoner, "bring mist to the eyes of many."