

LIGHTS OF THE SEASON

By Bryan J Ogg

December in Naperville is a festive time! The long winter nights and blustery days are punctuated with celebrations and traditions of all faiths. Families and friends gather in warm places sharing memories, good food, and gifts.

Since the very first settler's winter in 1831, Napervillians have had a lot of memories and stories to tell. That first winter was one of the most severe ever recorded. Snow was 36 inches deep with higher drifts from the wind which blew for 60 days. It was the bravery of John Naper (Joseph's brother), John Murray (a Naper brother-in-law), and Richard Sweet trekking more than 40 miles in the blizzard to acquire provisions from Gurdon Hubbard's trading posts along the Illinois/Indiana state border that saved the first settlers.

Napervillian holidays in the past were primarily celebrated with extended family members in the home and with their faith communities at places of worship. Until the 1920s, most winter celebrations of faith were centered on Christian traditions. Most of the early families were of English, Scottish, Irish, and German backgrounds. Traditions of decorations, food, songs, and gift-giving played out in schools and church programs.



Mary Anne Brock's 1st Christmas, 1932

Author's Collection

Store windows and lamp posts might have been decorated with fresh evergreens and holly from the Naperville Nurseries (1866-1960), which extended over 300 acres adjacent to the Von Oven mansion (now the rectory of St. John's Episcopal Church). According to the Christmas memories of Marie Rose Ellis, the Von Oven's always supplied an eight-to-ten foot Christmas tree for Naperville's brewer, John Stenger's living room. Ellis also remembers that about 20-25 candles were used to light the tree on Christmas Eve. The first strand of just eight electric lights was used around 1920.

On Christmas mornings in the early 1900s, Piety Hill (just north of Central Park) was full of sleighs, carriages, and wagons carrying families to the surrounding churches, such as Saints Peter and Paul and First Congregational Church. At the end of the services, church bells rang out each one with a different tone. Napervillians greeted one another warmly as they passed on the streets.

A holiday tradition at Saints Peter & Paul Church that was instituted by Steve Grobl when he became a parish usher in 1988 is for all the ushers to wear red plaid. "It is quite a sight," Grobl said, "after decades of use, many parishioners look forward to seeing the coats come out around Christmas!"

Shortly after the Central Area Naperville Development Organization (CAN-DO) was organized in 1972, charter member James Wehrli led an effort to trim the downtown buildings with white lights—often climbing the buildings to attach the wires himself!

Twinkle lights on the tree-lined streets and Riverwalk soon followed. Naperville had many Christmas tree lots that would attract public singing, food, and entertainment. In the early 1980s, the area in the Cee Bees grocery store parking lot, where Top Fashion is today, was a favorite lot for trees and entertainment. Around 1992, when the current Municipal Center was built, Naperville lit its first city tree! Christmas Memories and Christkindlmarket were also popular holiday activities.

The Rotary's Naper Lights is fast becoming a local tradition, and since 2001 the Parade of Lights is a large, popular, colorful celebration of winter. Mr. and Mrs. Claus always make an appearance during the parade. Napervillians decorate with more than fresh greens these days!

Millions of lights are used to create fantastic displays all over Naperville. In 1995, the Naperville Trolley began offering tours of various neighborhoods in festively decorated trolleys. Along the Riverwalk, one may visit Santa's house or watch the lighting of a public Menorah which has been lit annually since 2009.

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Since 1831, many other winter festivities from cultures around the world have found a new home in Naperville. What's yours?



Christmas Plaid Ushers, Saints Peter & Paul Church, 1990

Courtesy of Steve Grobl



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