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We need a little Christmas: The shape and significance of Christmas in America, 1945-1950

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We Need a Little Christmas:
The Shape and Significance of Christmas in America, 1945-1950

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

As soon as the weather turns cold, countless commercial, domestic, and cultural landscapes across the United States begin their collective metamorphosis into Christmas wonderlands. Christmas is such a force that, not surprisingly, it has received considerable scholarly attention. Numerous historians have traced the evolution of Christmas from a pre-Christian pagan winter festival to a staid Victorian domestic holiday, citing the latter period as the final stage of its development. Christmases since the Victorian Era, they argue, have not deviated significantly enough to warrant further analysis. Others have recognized the uniqueness of Christmas’s twentieth-century form but have not paid sufficient attention to its ever-evolving function. Building upon the valuable work of these and many other historians, this essay outlines the fundamental functions of the Christmas holiday for middle-class white Americans between 1945 and 1950. What did Christmas mean to them, and what domestic practices were deployed to honor that meaning?

Christmas was, indeed, a domestic holiday by the end of World War II; that quality had not changed since the turn of the century. It was also a holiday for which female homemakers were largely responsible. Homemaking magazines enjoyed wide circulation at midcentury and provided instructions for fashionable holiday observance as well as a forum for discussion of Christmas’s role within family life. December issues of Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, and Better Homes and Gardens published between 1945 and 1950 form the source base for this investigation, and they yield insight into the uses of Christmas after World War II. Christmas fulfilled three fundamental
functions: it renewed community goodwill; reconnected celebrants with the past, and offered a chance to infantilize children. Each of these functions held special significance after World War II, a time when goodwill seemed lacking, the past was appealing, and childish innocence was treasured.

This essay argues that the meaning of Christmas is in flux and that examining the fashions and public discussion of Christmas gives access to the holiday’s deeper meanings. Future studies may track Christmas’s continued evolution into later decades or to compare the function of Christmas within different American communities.
Chapter 1

Introduction

On Christmas Eve, 1945, nearly 10,000 Americans—men, women, children, young and old, enlisted and civilian—came streaming through the southeastern gates of the White House and onto the South Lawn, undeterred and perhaps even cheered by the unseasonably cold temperatures and carpet of snow beneath their feet. A white Christmas was far from guaranteed to Washingtonians, and no forecast could be more fitting for the event they were about to witness, the annual lighting of the White House Christmas tree. Crowds had gathered since 3:30 in the afternoon to partake in the preliminary entertainment. The United States Marine Band, “putting its martial airs aside,” opened the ceremony with Christmas tunes before yielding the stage to the Washington Choral Society who capped their performance with “O, Little Town of Bethlehem.”1 Young representatives of area Scout troops and cadet corps filed onto the stage, and one among them, Eagle Scout Jeremy Jackson, pledged that he and the nation’s youth would endeavor to maintain the American way of life.2 The mood was light yet reverent, but above all it was a mood of thankfulness.3 The World War from which the United States now climbed had claimed the lives of 418,500 Americans and compromised the way of

life for many more. During the war, the White House Christmas tree had been kept unlit in accordance with wartime energy conservation mandates. In that period of darkness, the tree did not receive its customary annual makeover but was instead bedecked in recycled and donated ornaments. In his 1944 Christmas broadcast, made from his home in Hyde Park, New York, President Roosevelt reflected grimly, “It is not easy to say ‘Merry Christmas’ to you, my fellow Americans, in this time of destructive war.” The task would come more easily to President Truman.

President Roosevelt had delivered the two prior Christmas addresses via radio, and Truman’s 1945 address marked a return to the more celebratory South Lawn setting. A wide, low bandstand was constructed for the event, and at its center rose the main stage from which Truman was to deliver his address. This portion of the stage was relatively small—scarcely big enough for its resident lectern and pair of schoolhouse chairs—but it was no less cheerfully adorned. A gleaming white pergola crowned the main stage and was supported at each corner by shining columns wrapped in feathery evergreen garland that glistened in the spotlights. Beneath the lectern hung an oversized wreath, the central link in a continuous evergreen chain encircling the bandstand. At the outer ends of the bandstand stood six monumental faux candles, giving the entire construction the

appearance of a candelabra. The tree itself was decorated with newly purchased Christmas ornaments befitting, what one reporter termed, “the era of peace” (figure 1).8 It was 5:15 when the worn but buoyant Truman, with his trousers tucked into high galoshes, took to the lectern.9 Though he alone occupied the small main stage, many more crowded the bandstand, including the guests of honor, wounded veterans from Walter Reed Hospital.10 After greeting the audience and playfully inspecting the young cadets who now stood at attention, Truman turned to his ebullient audience and began: “Ladies and

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9 Folliard, “Christmas Tree Glows for First Time.”
10 “Truman to Speak Over Radio Today.”
gentleman, and listeners of the radio audience: This is the Christmas that a war-weary world has prayed for.”

With the flip of a switch, the White House Christmas tree was once again aglow with red and green electric lights. The illumination constituted a symbolic assent from the president to American families that, yes, Christmas may once again be merry. Truman himself departed from Washington, D.C. shortly thereafter for Missouri where he would attend his customary three Christmas turkey dinners: one with his mother, one with his in-laws, and a third with his 96-year-old aunt. American families were likewise eager to reunite with their families and commence celebrating Christmas, “the great epic of home.” This was, as Truman observed, the Christmas for which the observant had prayed, for with it came the cessation of global warfare, the demobilization of American servicemen and women, family reunions, the promise of prosperity, and the triumph of the American cause which the magazine magnate and crier of the “American Century” Henry Luce distilled into three “big words”: democracy, justice, and freedom.

Though Christmas called celebrants to come back home, surround themselves with familiar faces, and worship its ancient symbols through reenactment of its similarly timeless customs, the holiday itself was far from static. Christmas had changed. Just as it had for millennia before, Christmas evolved to meet the needs of each new generation of celebrants.

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12 Folliard, "Christmas Tree Glows for First Time.”
For its postwar celebrants, Christmas met three fundamental needs. Christmas enabled celebrants to connect with an idealized past and to take refuge in its fantasy from modern woes; it allowed celebrants to recommit to “goodwill to men,” a cause whose recent absence had been keenly felt; and it gave parents an excuse to indulge children in their youthful desires and, in so doing, shield them from a world in which their inherent goodness was at once at risk and highly valuable. This essay will explore these psychosocial functions of Christmas, and it will focus upon the ways in which female homemakers were advised to carry these functions out by popular homemaking magazines of the era.

By this time in American history, Christmas had become a domestic holiday whose primary ritual observances took place within the home and among close family members. As such, the work of Christmas, which included decorating, cooking, and gift giving, was carried out primarily by female homemakers. Women did not work in isolation, however. The expanding readership for women’s magazines over the first half of the twentieth century indicates that women increasingly sought suggestions and guidance as they cooked, cared for children, patched their marriages, cleaned and, as their December issues evince, prepared for the holidays. One such magazine, *Good Housekeeping*, was intended for an audience of “middle

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Americans. Middlebrow. In every middle way.” One of *Good Housekeeping’s* sister magazines, *Better Homes & Gardens*, was similarly described by its editor as a “first-class magazine for the average family.” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which was also written for middle class readership but whose content differed in its expanded coverage of political issues and greater incorporation of contemporary literature. As such, these magazines shed light on but a portion of the American population: the white, middle-class, nuclear families of America. Rather than expand the scope of inquiry to encompass *all* Americans and risk doing a historical disservice to a much larger demographic, this investigation will focus upon the “average” as depicted in such popular publications. This study is further limited by the fact that homemaking magazines do not offer windows into real-life homes. Magazines did not document how families across American celebrated Christmas; instead they offered prescriptions for fashionable and proper observance which readers may or may not have followed. The consistency of these prescriptions over the five-year period of study and the popularity of these magazine titles suggests that their version of Christmas, including its decorative forms and social functions, resonated with the readership.

Though midcentury homemaking magazines, publications dedicated to portraying idealized home life, may indicate otherwise, the later 1940s were far from worry free. There was anxiety originating from the human toll of late war; the destruction that lay in its wake; the uncertain conditions of peace and of the peacetime economy, and the

17 Herbert Raymond Mayes, *The Magazine Maze: A Prejudiced Perspective* (New York City: Doubleday, 1980), 75. Mayes was the editor of Good Housekeeping from 1938 to 1958.
19 Endres and Lueck, 174.
shifting specter of an empowered communist menace, striving for the same nuclear power that horrified its creators. Journalist Dorothy Thompson, writing for *Ladies’ Home Journal*, addressed these pervasive atomic fears in 1948 in a gloomily titled article, “Depression and War.” Atomic weaponry, she argued, was an invitation, not a deterrent, to continued war. “When one state can utterly destroy another state, or reduce it to such a condition that the population returns to the status of animals… every serious diplomatic dispute which might result in war will tempt one of the other of the parties to strike first and obtain the advantage of the initial attack.” Lest it fall prey to Soviet “millennial ambitions,” the United States must bolster and protect its economy from depression, “for if she does, not only will her people be hungry, wretched and inclined to extreme measures, but the entire American foreign policy will collapse, the European Recovery Program will fail, and American security will go with it.” Hunger, wretchedness, collapse, and failure on multiple fronts. There were many ways for this, this triumph, to go wrong.

This particular issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, housing “War and Depression,” went on to advise readers on Christmas gift-giving (give classic books to children, not the “latest novel”); how to prepare a show-stopping Christmas goose, and even how to use Christmas as an occasion to rekindle conjugal affections. Beyond sharing magazine pages, in what ways did Christmas customs mingle with contemporary sociopolitical anxieties? How could celebrants make Christmas fit into their new world? It is my

20 Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York City: Basic Books, 1995), 5-9,
contention that Christmas’ commandment of goodwill could be used to atone for mankind’s recent sins; its inherent appeal to the past could help celebrants escape from the present, and its status as a child-centric holiday invited parents to indulge their own children in an attempt to prolong their precious innocence. Christmas was far more than a vapid consumerist festival; it was an important step in strengthening communal commitment to ideals that had seemed lacking in recent years. Therefore, the female homemakers whom magazines tasked with the proper execution of the Christmas holiday were simultaneously tasked with the psychosocial care of their family and rehabilitation of the national spirit.

Titles like *Ladies’ Home Journal, Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Good Housekeeping*, suggest ways in which homemakers could give form to these inchoate desires. In their editorial pages, nostalgic yearning manifested in traditional evergreen decorations and in other familiar and comforting objects. Christmas was not yet a time for aesthetic innovation. Hosting guests at holiday parties, giving gifts, making charitable donations, and decorating home exteriors were ways to spread goodwill to fellow man. This compulsion to goodwill took on a global character as American Christmas celebrants were forced to compare their own material wealth, health, and national fortune to that of Europe and Asia. Children abroad suffered as a result of adult transgressions, and children in America stood to lose the innocence and kindness required by the nation to start again. The fanciful decorations of Christmas, its special foods and child-centered gift giving created an atmosphere of joyful anticipation in children, a phenomena relished by parents who believed childhood disappeared too quickly, after which children would enter into an inhospitable world.
Homemaking magazines were aspirational how-to companions, focusing more on the materials and work of Christmas celebration, and less on their historic and symbolic import. To best utilize homemaking magazines as a source base, this thesis draws from the work of cultural historians such as Steven Nissenbaum whose *The Battle for Christmas* traces the development of the holiday from its pre-Christians roots through the nineteenth century, demonstrating that Christmas has always been a battleground for social order and supremacy. With *Christmas in America: A History*, Penne Restad joins Nissenbaum in recounting the evolution of and contestation over Christmas while focusing attention on Christmas’ ability to heal sectional tensions during the Civil War era, giving credence to the idea that mid-twentieth-century Americans, too, valued Christmas’s power to unite disparate parties. It is not the mere idea of Christmas that heals and unites celebrants; that task falls in large part to its physical accoutrements.

Karal Ann Marling’s *Merry Christmas!: Celebrating America’s Greatest Holiday* focuses on the stuff of Christmas, from cards to cookies, unpacking their histories and symbolic import. Marling’s work is far-reaching, leaving room for a temporally focused study like this one. These Christmas histories, as well as John R. Gillis’s *A World of Their Own Making*, Elizabeth Pleck’s *Celebrating the Family* and others support the argument that no holiday survives without the constant, conscious effort of each new generation of celebrants. As President Truman lit the community Christmas tree for the expectant crowd on Christmas Eve, 1945 he observed, “This is the Christmas that a war-weary world has prayed for.” Christmas 1945 brought peace, prosperity, and the promise of family reunions, all fixtures of an old fashioned Christmas, but they were, as period sources reveal, recolored in a Cold War light.
Chapter 2

An Old Fashioned Christmas

According to our grandparents, certain things were simply better in “their day.” Maybe the music was better, the politicians less corrupt, or the pace of life more agreeable. Thus is the power of time, or the weakness of memory, that events of the past tend to take on a golden haze for old timers prone to reminisce. The tendency to wax nostalgic is itself not a new development, and it is hemmed in by neither subject matter nor literary format. Christmas is the nostalgic subject for Evelyn Ardis Whitman whose Better Homes and Gardens article of 1950 assures readers that “Christmas was different” in her day. “When I was little,” Whitman recalls, “[Christmas] did not begin arriving months ahead of time… No, it flashed upon you like a deer out of the forest.” A stirring image. What followed was a gentle condemnation of Christmas “today” (i.e. 1950), and a scolding for parents who failed to reenact Christmas’s treasured traditions, like cookie baking and hosting parties, for their own children.\(^{23}\) Christmas itself is an inherited tradition, and its proper observance entails countless other rituals, enacted in order to honor ancestors, comfort oneself, and edify younger generations. Christmas was a time to look back in time. This chapter outlines the ways in which midcentury Christmas celebrants could use the holiday to recapture “flashes” from the past and why that transportive power was appealing.

Writing during the Second World War from his temporary keep within Vichy France in the city of Clermont-Ferrand, the historian Marc Bloch remarked that Christianity is “essentially a historical religion… whose prime dogmas are based on events.” Offering up Christianity’s essential statement of faith, the Apostles Creed, as an illustration of this historicist quality, Bloch reads, “I believe in Jesus Christ… who was crucified under Pontius Pilate… and who rose from the dead on the third day.” Framed as such, it certainly appears that Christianity is a religion concerned foremost with events from its past, and that it is, at all times, referential to these foundational events. Thus the Christian stands in contrast to, for example, the deist for whom “it is enough to have the inner light to believe in God.”²⁴ By presenting the Apostle’s Creed, Bloch was attempting to explain the strong western historiographic tradition by rooting it in “essentially” historical Christian religious practices, but Bloch’s observation about the historicism inherent in Christianity has other applications.

Carried across the Atlantic and to the United States, the historicism of Christianity helps to explain the activities of its devotees, namely the activity of Christmas. In 1940s America, Christmas was the most widely celebrated event on the Christian liturgical calendar, surpassing holidays like Easter and the period of Lent. In addition to being widely celebrated, it was the holiday whose impact was felt in the most diverse settings. No town square, pulpit, department store, magazine rack, movie screen, radio station, classroom, or Christian household was left untouched by the “Christmas spirit.” Despite its prominence within the Christian church, Christmas is a holiday of questionable historical pedigree. No early Christian text calls for the annual celebration of Christ’s

birth, much less that it must be commemorated with trees, egg nog, and singing.
Christmas, as it was celebrated in the United States in the latter 1940s, resulted from a distant, foggy hodgepodge of European customs—some pagan, some Christian—and American commercial innovation. If the precise origins of Christmas could be plotted, it would not diminish the fact that the holiday was, and still is, in a state of flux.

The stated meaning of Christmas (that which is implicit in its name) is the celebration of Christ’s birth, and the birth of Christ is, naturally, a fundamental event in the history of Christianity, but that does not secure Christmas as an immutable feature of the faith. Christmas, like all ritual observances, must serve a purpose for the living in order to be annually revived and to survive across generations. It must be worth something to be reenacted, year after year, by its celebrants. What purpose did Christmas serve for its American celebrants living in the wake of World War II? Marc Bloch, one of the many victims of that war, may have answered by pointing to the history-oriented “beginnings of this faith” which, he explained, “are also its foundations”25 Christmas allowed its celebrants to connect with the past, and Americans during this period were eager to do so for it offered a temporary escape from the sociopolitical climate and anxiety generated by the Second World War and by the onset of the Cold War.

Christmas is not unique for its ability to connect celebrants with the past; many holidays share this trait. Independence Day calls on Americans to contemplate the historical events of July 4, 1776, while Thanksgiving revives romanticized images of early Native American contact. These and other holidays reference historical events and also require celebrants to act in ways befitting the events. For Thanksgiving, this means

celebrants prepare a bountiful meal and give thanks; for Americans on the Fourth, this means waving flags and detonating fireworks. Christmas, whose express purpose is to commemorate the birth of Christ, requires its celebrants contemplate the birth of Christ and do good deeds on his behalf, including donating to charity, giving gifts, and spreading good will. Keeping up the Christmas spirit was easier said than done. Living as they were in the shadow of the deadliest war in human history, Americans viewed their times and themselves as poorly suited for such a pious endeavor. How could “peace on Earth, good will to men” now come to those who had been working so successfully undermine it?

The solution lay in Christmas itself. Like many holidays, Christmas required the reenactment of customs received from one’s ancestors as part of their traditional inheritance. Americans of the 1940s did not decorate trees because it was a novel activity but because it was a traditional activity. Reenacting traditions on Christmas allowed celebrants to connect to their ancestors and to bygone times. Americans of the post-World War II era took special solace in Christmas’ inherited traditions, using the holiday as a vehicle by which they transported themselves to (what they perceived to be) the happier, simpler times of the past. In turn, these re-imagined and re-enacted golden days offered a better venue for celebrating Christ and Christian ideals than their modern battle-scarred world.

Though its pedigree is hazy, by the 1940s Christmas in America had evolved into a domestic event, meaning that most of its entailed customs took place within the home. These included decorating the home, giving gifts, hosting family gatherings, eating particular foods, communing with loved ones and, depending on the household
composition, staging visits from Santa Claus for children. The traditional customs of Christmas therefore fell under the purview of female homemakers, those charged with managing domestic events both mundane and ceremonial. Household management, an occupation that included the upkeep of a household as well as the physical and psychological maintenance of those who resided within it, was not a simple task, nor were homemakers necessarily prepared to handle its frequent challenges. Guidance and, when desired, innovation came in the pages of homemaking magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, and Better Homes and Gardens*. Each publication boasted monthly circulation in the millions, meaning that its seasonal tips on Christmas celebration and yuletide stories entered American homes on a massive scale. Given their widespread popularity, homemaking magazines of the postwar period resonated with the desires, values, and habits of American women of that time.26 December issues, which invariably featured instructions on how to best celebrate Christmas and often meditations on the nature of the holiday, thus reveal popular sentiment regarding the holiday and ways in which celebrants could bridge the gap between the professed ideals of Christmas and their perceived national or personal shortcomings.

Maintaining time honored Christmas traditions was one way in which celebrants could bridge the gap between Christmases past and present. Tradition is not handed thoughtlessly down through the generations; it is something that must be intentionally revived and maintained with each successive year. The necessity of *conscious* reenactments of tradition grows as the living conditions which gave rise to them change, and the pursuit of tradition was not without its pitfalls and setbacks. *Good Housekeeping*

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writer Katherine Fite related a story detailing the general haplessness of the men in her family regarding Christmas preparations. Men, she writes, cannot (or, at any rate, do not) notice the work that constructing and celebrating Christmas entails, yet they nonetheless attempt to share in that work, and in so doing they tend to hamper its progress. Her father’s downfall came in the pursuit of tradition. So intent was Fite’s father on retrieving a traditional, forest-grown Christmas tree, that he drove his daughter Katherine 40 miles beyond the closest Christmas tree lot and felled a scrawny tree by the roadside. Fite’s father was caught in the act by the “irate” land owner and charged a hefty sum as payment for his crime. Her father, Fite recalls, requested that she not divulge their tree’s origin story to his wife lest his foolishness be revealed.27

Katherine Fite’s father was less enamored with the thought of a grand, wild Christmas tree than with the idea that he had a part to play in reenacting traditions from his childhood with his own child. “My father thought I should experience the thrill of driving with him to the farm to cut a tree… [that] a child should go to the country and select the tree. Something to remember for years.”28 Something to remember, and perhaps to repeat with her own children decades later. Fite poked fun at the quixotic quest of her father, and of men generally, and in so doing revealed a facet of his own conception of a traditional Christmas. Her intention was not to create a commentary on tradition, but she nevertheless revealed the powerful pull it exerted on people. When *Better Homes* of December 1946 asked its readers to submit responses to the question, “Should you tell them [your children] there is a Santa Claus,” one reader invoked

28 Fite, “Rest, Ye Merrie Gentlemen,” 220.
tradition outright in defense of the custom. Writing on behalf of the Santa Claus custom, Mary K. Reynolds argued that, “the time is short when our children can live the beautiful legend of Santa Claus. Soon those precious five or six years will have slipped by and our babies will be saying, ‘Santa is the bunk.’” Reynolds’ version of what she terms “an old fashioned Christmas,” in which Santa Claus played a leading role, was “surely one of the joys everyone should reap from having a family.”

Other authors invoked Christmases past to comfort readers. New Yorker staff writer Frank Sullivan wrote a piece for Good Housekeeping in 1946 entitled “Remembrance of Yules Past” wherein he recounted several short, seemingly mundane stories from his turn of the century childhood Christmases spent in Saratoga Springs. In quick succession Sullivan recalls catching his parents decorating the tree (something Santa Claus was supposed to do in their household), the childish joy derived from the perfect Christmas present, and a memorable Christmas dinner during which his sister dropped the roast turkey on the floor. These simple stories, he writes, may give the reader some solace from the “harshness and stridency” of 1946. From where does his harshness and stridency originate? Sullivan indicates that their origin is in contemporary geopolitics. He, a World War I veteran, returned home for Christmas in 1918 believing—hoping against hope—that, “there was to be no more war, ever.” Recent events had proven him wrong, millions of times over. Since his time spent in the service or, in other words, since his first exposure to the atrocities of warfare, no Christmas was ever as joyful or memorable as the childhood ones spent in Saratoga Springs. By inviting readers

29 “Should You Tell Them There’s a Santa Claus,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1946, 4. An article such as this may be an indicator of the uncertain place of Santa Claus in American Christmas ritual. Would such an article have been produced if there was not a healthy back-and-forth debate over the merits of Santa Claus? It would be interesting to plot the popularity of the Santa Claus tradition.
to join him in his reminiscences, he wishes to share a bit of that childish mirth with them and invite them back to a time when they, as children, were ignorant of man’s destructive power. He signs off with the suggestion, “Maybe we all ought to believe in Santa Claus again. Maybe we’ll have to, if we are to survive the atomic age.”

Sullivan yearned for simpler times, and the inclusion of his story in Good Housekeeping indicates that readers did, too. If readers craved more nostalgia, they needed only to pick up Better Homes and Gardens from that same December 1946 magazine rack. The featured article, “Profile of a Real Santa Claus,” told the story of Leonidas Io Beall, a man who had spent the last five Christmases playing Santa Claus at the prominent Washington, DC department store Woodward and Lothrop. Beall, they wrote, was a natural fit for the position, given not only his rotund figure but also his simple, rural upbringing. The young Beall spent his Iowa Christmases skimming the snowy countryside in a horse-drawn open sleigh and sitting “at the foot of the Methodist Christmas tree” learning lessons about giving from his father, a preacher. “In those faraway days” of Beall’s childhood, the writer explains, ”you thought more about gifts for others, instead of wondering what they would give you.” Beall embodied the Christmas spirit of giving, and was able to do so because of his days spent “faraway” in time and place from contemporary Washington, DC where, presumably, people concerned themselves foremost with receiving, thus violating one of the principal “reasons for the season.” Beall attempted to instill his country-bred Christmas wisdom in

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the children who visited his department store throne by asking them to think of presents for their siblings, too.

Taking children to visit Santa Claus in a department store had become Christmas canon by the 1940s, and so had decorating homes to rival the yuletide gaiety of the shops. Chris Hutten, columnist for *Good Housekeeping*, provided readers of 1946 with instructions for creating decorative Christmas arrangements from inexpensive materials ranging from eggshells to artificial carnations. Hutten’s arrangements vary widely in design, from “modern” simplified Santa Claus figures to a winsome evergreen bouquet wedged into a red dime store dustpan. No matter their home’s current decorative scheme, readers could build something to complement it and, in so doing, “turn inexpensive decorations into part of your family tradition.”

Hutten’s comment illustrates the paradox which lies at the heart of tradition: that it can be invented. Concepts of history and inheritance figure prominently in the definition of “tradition,” but they are not integral to its creation. An “invented tradition” is Eric Hobsbawm’s and Terence Ranger’s term for practices whose origins are purported to be much older, organic, and apolitical than they truly are. It is no coincidence, Hobsbawm argues, that the rise or, in some cases, formal declaration of Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Columbus Day, and St. Patrick’s Day all occurred in the latter half of the 19th century. The holidays were deployed in an effort to unite an increasing heterogenous nation in a standardized celebration of shared values. Holidays fostered a sense of shared history, a main ingredient of group cohesion.

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Christmas became an American national holiday in 1870, during that same period of holiday proliferation. By that time in American history, Christmas had assumed a rough semblance of its modern form as a domestic, sentimental, and holy day. This characterization stood in marked contrast to Christmas’ earlier incarnation as a carnivalesque holiday with tendencies toward drunkenness.\(^{34}\) In fact, for most of its earthly existence, Christmas leaned toward the carnivalesque, but the 1870 “invention” of Christmas in the United States cemented the holiday’s latest incarnation as the “traditional” one.\(^{35}\) By the mid-twentieth century, no American homemaking magazine shared tips on repelling carousers or even recipes for boozy Christmas punches; such behavior no longer comprised a traditional Christmas. Instead, as in the case of *Good Housekeeping*’s Chris Hutten and the improvised Christmas decorations, traditional Christmas involved decorating the home and hoping the next generation carried on your customs. Just as national holidays had served to unite (if temporarily) diverse Americans, Christmas traditions—be they decorating with dustpans or hunting a wild tree—held the promise of uniting families now and across time. Helen Breeder Cross, writing for *Better Homes* in 1948, explained, “It’s tradition that holds a family together in the home despite outside competition.”\(^{36}\)

Tradition was, and still is, a powerful force. It was also a powerful tool. Policymakers wielded it against disunion in postbellum America, and by the mid-

\(^{34}\) The older, carnivalesque celebration of Christmas had not vanished, but the sentimental holiday was ascendant at the time.


\(^{36}\) Helen Breeder Cross, “Have You Any Traditions At Your House,” *Better Homes and Gardens*, December 1948, 27.
twentieth century, American companies had picked up tradition to help boost their sales. American advertising and consumer culture blossomed in the late 1940s. Just as Americans themselves had been living under a pall of economic depression and wartime austerity, so had American manufacturers. Widespread unemployment and depressed incomes dampened consumer spending in the 1930s, while federal price fixing and materials rationing kept curbed spending in the early 1940s though personal incomes climbed.\textsuperscript{37} By the war's end, American manufacturers happily welcomed the collision of pent-up consumer demand, rising disposable income, and the incremental lifting of material restrictions. It was up to advertisers to define consumer desire and funnel spending toward select products in an ever expanding marketplace.

By linking the physical consumption of their products to esteemed, abstract and, most importantly, insatiable desires (like glamour, power, taste or tradition) advertisers ensured that there would always be a market for their unnecessary goods. Sure, consumers may not need Coca-Cola, but surely they needed the “pause that refreshes,” a bit of relaxation in their busy lives. Tapping into the appeal of tradition was but one method of directing consumer desires and spending. The December 1945 issue of \textit{Ladies' Home Journal}, whose pages were invariably plastered with the most vibrant and alluring of illustrations, featured an advertisement for Jane Parker fruitcakes that nearly eclipsed them all. This fruitcake, which “looks good… tastes even better,” is embedded on a background of evergreen needles, pinecones, and meandering ribbon, and at its side sits a

place card informing readers that this is a “Traditional American Treat.” The same issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* featured another appeal to tradition, this time from Pyrex who claimed that “giving Pyrex ware… is one of America’s youngest Christmas traditions.” Baker’s brand shredded coconut claimed that its product not only “looked like Christmas,” but that it was back in “old time Christmas plenty.” At Christmas time 1950, *Better Homes* encouraged readers to “start a family tradition” with the purchase of a foot-tall church shaped music box. These companies prodded readers to buy a bit of tradition, a bit of old-fashioned Christmas, in the form of coconut and fruitcakes, but no company matched Will & Baumer, the makers of Taperlite Candles, in their exaltation of tradition. “Customs and traditions are guideposts to graceful living,” but traditions, the narrator continues, “must be acquired young.” Using Taperlite Candles at all meals, and not just at special occasions, would ensure that youngsters are acquainted with the customs of gracious living. Less explicit appeals to tradition came any time an advertisement featured a woman in colonial garb, antiquated cooking hearths, or slogans scrawled in blackletter text.

Enacting the traditions of Christmas allowed celebrants to connect with bygone times, characteristics of which seemed especially appealing given the contemporary sociopolitical climate. Frank Sullivan expressed his discomfort with living in the “atomic age” and the editor-in-chief of *Better Homes*, Frank W. McDonough, echoed his

40 Baker’s Coconut, “Whe-e-ee! There’s Coconut This Christmas” (advertisement), *Good Housekeeping*, December 1948, 130.
foreboding sentiment at Christmastime 1946. “The words of [Christmas] cheer,” he writes, “have a hollow sound. The promise of peace and good will has a note of mockery in it. Dark fears abound; instead of having faith and hope, many of us, unmoved by the moral of Christmas, seem to have yielded to the gloomy belief that the human race is a mean and dismal failure.”43 These are the words of a man whose country had won the war. But Christmas, McDonough continues, offers man a chance to contemplate his divine origin, to remember his good deeds, to recharge and, at last, act to contain the destructive force of his monster, the atomic bomb. Not every writer referenced the bomb to decry modernity; perhaps it was always in the back of their minds, though. Helen Breeder Cross praised Christmas’ power to counteract the “pace of modern living.”44 Katherine Brush was more detailed in her description of the sins of modern Americans. Brush observed that the same Americans who had held parades and hoisted banners in honor of returning soldiers had now turned their backs on them by refusing them jobs. She believed this was symptomatic of a nationwide fervor to forget the war and the plights of their allies who still struggled to rebuild. Forgetting the war, she explained, led to “forgetting the issues that were involved, the freedoms for which men died.” In her country so complacent, the Ku Klux Klan “reared its peaked pinhead once again. Talmadge was reelected, so was Bilbo, heaven help us.”45

Brush’s invocation of the Ku Klux Klan at Christmas time is troubling, but Frank McDonough’s 1945 essay on American spiritual isolation may be even more so. In the

44 Helen Breeder Cross, “Have You Any Traditions At Your House,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1948, 27.
December 1945 issue of *Better Homes*, McDonough eschewed cheerful celebration of the first post-war Christmas, opting instead for a chilly indictment of America’s wartime charades. “Most of us who attended Christmas celebrations during the war years remember an uneasy feeling pervading them,” he begins, “like the uncertainty of a masquerader. For we were not really happy… Hidden by smiling faces, our secretly anxious hearts were learning that living is necessarily a lonely business into which not even our dearest ones may fully enter.” For McDonough, the war had recolored life itself, transforming it into an inescapably lonely experience. Where family and friends had failed at toppling the wall of isolation between one another, could the Allies succeed? Did victory against the Axis bring victory against spiritual isolation? The words of McDonough and of Frank Sullivan indicate that postwar anxiety precluded such spiritual strides and caused some Americans to turn toward its past, and away from its atomic future, in search of solace.

But then there is Christmas, the reset button. No matter the political situation at hand, Christmas and the reenactment of its ancient traditions offered a portal to the golden age from which the traditions were thought to originate. For some, that golden age played out in old-fashioned rural idyll, for others in a manger in Bethlehem. Both were better places for fostering the fabled “peace on earth, good will to men” than post-war America. Though these golden ages were lost to the march of time, homemakers were advised to recreate them in their own homes using not just traditional customs (and coconuts and fruitcakes) but also select Christmas decorations. Magazines showed shrines to old-fashioned rural life built from tabletop sleighs, miniature villages, candles

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and candle-shaped electric lights, and Colonial Williamsburg-style fruit arrangements, all antiquated fixtures of America’s rural past.⁴⁷ These shrines sat before Christmas trees that were preferably retrieved from the countryside and not from an urban tree lot. Recall Katherine Fite’s arboreally-challenged father who believed that “a child should go to the country” to fetch the perfect tree.⁴⁸ Accompanying hymns, in the form of popular Christmas music, were suitably retrospective with their frequent references to horses, sleighs, friendly farmers, and romps in the countryside. Hollywood gave life to this rural imagery in films such as *I’ll Be Seeing You* (1944), *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945) and *White Christmas* (1954), all of which tell tales of urban denizens whose Christmas time pilgrimages into the countrysides of Texas, Connecticut, and Vermont heal wounds and teach lessons.⁴⁹ Complementing these tales was an illustrated poem featured in *Good Housekeeping* of December 1949. The poem, entitled “Sunshine Sunshine Go Away” is about a man named Mr. Sunshine, a stodgy and uncharitable landlord living in America’s greatest, most fearsome metropolis of New York. Though he lives in the city, Mr. Sunshine is hobbled by self-imposed isolation until an eccentric tenant teaches him the value of community, just in time for Christmas.⁵⁰

Homemaking magazines of the 1940s reached back in time to America’s rural past, and even further still to the year zero, with the display of Madonna figures and the

ever popular nativity set. Joanna Beals dedicated an entire article from the December 1948 issue of Better Homes and Gardens to tips on arranging Madonna figurines. Madonnas may be ensconced in artful cornucopias to symbolize “life and fruitfulness” or framed with evergreen branches to “dramatize” the figure. Beals explains that, appearances aside, “a Madonna will serve as a reminder, too, that the real purpose of Christmas is to commemorate the birth of a child who brought new hope and faith to the world.” Were American Christians of 1948 in need of such a reminder? Beals believed so, and the article’s inclusion in such a widely circulated magazine (approximately 2,000,000 issues circulating daily in 1940, a 50% increased from 1930) indicates that she was not alone in that conviction. Janet Graham, writing for Good Housekeeping in 1948, shared a short poem entitled “This Little Piggy Went To Market” about a woman desperately lacking in true cheerful and charitable Christmas spirit. Graham’s “Piggy” is a Christmas shopper whose demanding, demeaning tone with salespeople wins her derision from the clerks and fellow customers. “This time of year was meant for goodwill,” Graham writes, but patience for this petulant woman “is nil.” This is a cautionary tale for any reader who may, at times, find themselves forgetting Christmas’ express purpose and becoming preoccupied with Christmas’ commercial activities. Nativity sets fulfilled the same role as Madonna figures, illustrating in more explicit

52 Joanna Beals, “Madonna Christmas Settings,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1948, 12-14
terms the origins of Christ and, by extension, of the renewing power he was believed to carry.

Christmas magazines in postwar America seized upon the holiday’s historical origin story, its inheritance of customs, and imagined golden ages of celebration in the rural American past and in the early Christian world to transport readers from the modern world which seemed unsuitable for commemorating the birth of a man they called the Prince of Peace. Christmas customs and imagery of the 21st century, in a peculiar but not at all unpredictable twist, turn to mid-twentieth century America as the last great golden age of Christmas. Today, as the Christmas seasons falls earlier and earlier across the land, radio stations revert to wartime tunes of Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole. The television airwaves broadcast the Crosby double feature White Christmas and Holiday Inn, along with Miracle on 34th Street (about another jaded New Yorker) and It’s a Wonderful Life. Contemporary Christmas decorations make heavy use of sleighs and other rural icons, but they also use station-wagons, television sets, and even candy-colored stand mixers, all items evocative of midcentury living. If any of our midcentury magazine contributors saw their humdrum housewares hanging upon a Christmas tree, what would their response be?

The apotheosis of midcentury Christmas comports with the thesis presented by Paul Fussell in his book Wartime. The Second World War, he writes, was neither glorious nor glamorous; it was unadulterated agony, bloody and torturous. The memory of the war, however, became adulterated and neutered, first by censorship and later by nostalgia for the times forged by the Greatest Generation. Remarking on the Civil War,
Walt Whitman predicted that, “the real war will never get in the books.”\textsuperscript{55} It seems like neither will the real Christmas. Despite the current preference toward midcentury kitsch at Christmas, the holiday did not represent unbridled joy to those who celebrated it. Though contemporary nostalgia threatens to sterilize postwar Christmas memories, homemaking magazines—these instruction manuals and companions to domestic holiday officiants—stand as a window onto the fears and desires that undergirded Christmas celebration.

In the December 1948 issue of \textit{Good Housekeeping}, tucked between an advertisement for mops and an article addressing women's rights, there sits a letter by Harrison Smith entitled “A Christmas Wish For Our Thirty-Third President.” On behalf of the American people, Smith wishes Harry Truman well and promises loyalty to the president and the United States, come what may. Truman, he writes, has taken on the “onerous” and “man-killing” job of leading a nation along the slippery brink of Cold War. “Our President must know that it is no longer necessary to convince the people that we are in danger. Today we do know it; we are awake and alert.” With that in mind, Smith continues in his wish:

\begin{quote}
    It is thus a propitious moment to send to the President our Christmas greeting and, in addressing him, to remember in our hearts the ancient words, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’ If he hearkens, in this time of reflection and rebirth, to the cacophony of voices about him, to the outposts and corners of the world, he must be a man of faith indeed if he does not quail at the menacing roar, and think, in moments of despair, “Peace? There is no peace, or good will, anywhere.”\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{56} Harrison Smith, “A Christmas Wish For Our Thirty-Third President,” \textit{Good Housekeeping}, December 1948, 33, 268-269.
You did not have to be president to share in that despair. Yet if there were Americans who strove against the “menacing roar” of doubt in search of “peace on earth, goodwill to men,” Christmas lent numerous tools to the cause.

This time in American history posed a challenge to Christmas celebrants. At no point had the good will of Christmas been so badly needed, and at no point had it seemed so far away. The solution was not to abandon Christmas but to revive images, memories, and ideals of Christmases of the past, of the “happy golden days of yore” they heard about in their Christmas songs. Christmas, as a tradition-based holiday, was intrinsically retrospective, an effect amplified in homemaking magazines where nativity sets and quaint miniature villages, rustic tales and reminiscences prevailed. For those who desired more than just retrospective happiness, Christmas was the ideal time to create peace and goodwill anew and apply it like a salve to the injured world.
Chapter 3

With Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men

Christmas found Geoffrey Crayon traversing the English countryside. He traveled alone and through a landscape that had turned icy and bleak, but this was no cause for despair. Crayon was simply satisfying his lifelong love of travel, his fondness for “visiting new scenes, and observing strange characters and manners” far from his native American shores. The prospect of whiling away the Christmas holiday in an English manor, that being his ultimate destination, was alluring. Nonetheless, the holiday brought to Crayon faint pangs of longing, the kind likely to strike anyone separated from their family during a season so marked for familial conviviality. Crayon’s pain was fleeting, for his temporary English kin extended to him all the comfort of home and of the holiday. “Strange and sojourner as I am in the land— though for me no social hearth may blaze, no hospitable roof throw open its doors, nor the warm grasp of friendship welcome me at the threshold— yet I feel the influence of the season beaming into my soul from the happy looks of those around me.”

This character Geoffrey Crayon, as one might guess from his somewhat ludicrous name, was not a real traveler; he was the protagonist of Washington Irving’s 1820 The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman, a faux-travelogue and one of the most widely read American works of its time. Washington Irving’s Sketchbook, with its

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description of a jolly English manor Christmas, is one of the founding volumes of a great library of Christmas fiction. Joining Irving some twenty years later was Charles Dickens whose *A Christmas Carol* (1843) echoes the sentiment of the gentleman Geoffrey Crayon: the Christmas season is a time apart from the rest during which celebrants feel enabled to restore their faith in humanity and forge new bonds of community. The spirit of Christmas moved Dickens’ miserly Ebenezer Scrooge to abandon his self-imposed spiritual isolation, while Geoffrey Crayon’s adoptive English family ensured that no such feeling of isolation would ever befall their friend at Christmas time. His hosts embody the highest qualities of this “season of regenerated feeling—the season for kindling not merely the fire of hospitality in the hall, but the genial flame of charity in the heart.”

The works of Dickens and Irving survive, not just as literary artifacts—stories to be probed for their historical import, their linguistic turns—but as icons of the Christmas season. The Dickensian cityscape of *A Christmas Carol* has seen countless creative adaptations and, as discussed in the preceding chapter, Irving’s folksy rural tales complement Christmastime’s inherent nostalgic bent by summoning images of “olde” and unadulterated Christmas cheer. The tales are charming windows to bygone eras, but more than that they are illustrations of the communal Christmas spirit. Christmas’ perceived power to foster community survived, and indeed thrived, even in mid-twentieth-century America, a time when the fabled “peace on earth, good will to men” was seen by contemporary commentators as sorely lacking. Christmastime, however, was a time to shake loose the gloom of the late war and, through acts of charity and everyday kindness, embark on a new age of world brotherhood.

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It was that spirit that had moved enemy combatants to mutual acts of goodwill. German prisoners of war held in New York were treated to a small ration of turkey as well as candy and cigarettes on Christmas Day, 1945. According to newspaper accounts, Christmas was “the only holiday of the year” for the German prisoners.\(^59\) What the reporter meant, of course, was not that the German calendar held but one holiday, but that Christmas was the only one which their American captors deemed appropriate for recognition and appropriate for a bit a goodwill between enemies. Perhaps this canned meat and tobacco was as much a gift for the Germans as it was an affirmation of a global Christian brotherhood. This may go to explain the occasional acts of goodwill or, perhaps more accurately, the abstention from ill will that took place during the war as well.

Despite the mounting enemy presence on its Dutch and Belgian borders, France partook of a Christmas time truce with Germany in 1939.\(^60\) A year later, Britain and Germany observed an unofficial Christmas Day bombing ban.\(^61\)

These brotherly acts of truces and the turkey dinner were brief, irregularly observed and, ultimately futile acts given the war at hand. Peacetime held better chances for the “good will to men” prescribed to Christmas celebrants. Following the war, the goodwill which characterized the Christmas season assumed an added dimension; it became more globally minded. Celebrants were concerned with the welfare and

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happiness of their family, their neighbors, and community at large, but they also turned a concerned eye to the war ravaged countries recently evacuated.

The belief in the power of Christmas to unite people, be they separated by a picket fence or an ocean, was apparent in the pages of postwar women’s magazines. These magazines devoted ample space to yuletide decorations, recipes, and fashions, features which are themselves deserving of dedicated historical inquiry, but it is in their short stories, articles, and poetry where one finds more direct engagement and moralizing on the topic of Christmastime unity. Short stories are rife with Ebenezer Scrooge type characters whose icy hearts are thawed by the Christmas spirit; articles implore readers to consider the impoverished children of Europe while making their annual charitable donations, and the popular poetry sections carry wise words from old masters on the subject of Christmas cheer. It was the monthly poetry page, known as “Memory Lane,” from the December 1948 issue of Good Housekeeping that revived the words of Irving's Geoffrey Crayon for readers. After basking in the “glow” of Christmas’ “innocent enjoyment,” Crayon went on to condemn those who resisted the charm of Christmas merriment. “He who can turn churlishly away from contemplating the felicity of his fellow beings,” Crayon states, “may have his moments of strong excitement and selfish gratification, but he wants the genial and social sympathies, which constitute the charm of a Merry Christmas.”

The words of Washington Irving via Geoffrey Crayon reveal that notions of goodwill figured prominently in the good Christmas of the early nineteenth century. Though a stranger, without a hearth or home to call his own, Irving’s traveler was greeted

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62 “Memory Lane,” Good Housekeeping, December 1948, 18.
and cheered by those around him. The presence of Irving’s quotation, and many more which echo its sentiment, in magazines of this period suggest that readers were also wed to this conception of the Christmas spirit. Historically, Christmas and acts of goodwill went hand-in-hand, though the precise form of those acts changed considerably over time. One early example of Christmas-goodwill connection comes in the form of mumming, an English folk tradition in which groups of masked individuals visited the homes of their wealthy neighbors, demanded food, drink and an invitation to enter the home; if their demands went unmet, the mummers threatened property damage. In this instance, goodwill was wrestled from the upper class in a rare instance of social inversion. Mumming, that grievous form of trick-or-treating, is related in spirit to the English (and colonial English) observance of Boxing Day. Boxing Day was (and still is) held on the day after Christmas, and it is observed by paying gratuities to tradespeople with whom one has done business or, if applicable, to servants. The act may appear on its surface as a simple gesture of thanks but, like mumming, it served to solidify a paternalistic social structure in which the lower orders required patronage and occasional pacification.

By the late nineteenth century, Christmas goodwill customs had changed, and their new form persisted into the mid-twentieth century. No longer were the lower classes making such brazen demands of the elite; instead children made demands of their

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parents. Children became the primary recipients of Christmas gifts (and the focus of the holiday festivities generally), but charitable donations still figured prominently in Christmas giving. Men dressed as Santa Claus solicited donations for the Salvation Army on city street corners; magazines urged readers to fight tuberculosis by purchasing Christmas seals, and a Good Housekeeping editor summoned the memory of Franklin Roosevelt to solicit donations to the charity of his creation, the March of Dimes. These formal solicitations suggest charity had become a professionalized endeavor, carried out by national and international nonprofit organizations. No mumming, no “boxing.”

Another form of Christmas giving, tipping, survived into the postwar era, though it was apparently a source of consternation for some. Jennifer Colton, writing for Good Housekeeping in 1950, provided readers with a guide to Christmas tipping: who deserves a tip, and how much? “There seems to be no accepted table for tips,” she writes, a condition which keeps “a small cloud hovering over this pleasant act of giving.” Unlike the old customs of mumming and “boxing,” wherein giving was done for the sake of social cohesion, Colton characterizes Christmas tipping as a good and desirable manifestation of the Christmas spirit. “Christmas is that moment when our urge to give really breaks loose. Christmas spirit, we call it,” she explains, “an emotional reflection of the Greater Goodness, which we channel into presents, greetings, Christmas hugs, invitations to dinner, and tips.” Giving was an “urge,” an irresistible compulsion.

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animated not by social obligation but by the “Christmas spirit,” which was itself a manifestation of something like godliness.\(^{68}\)

Others at this time linked Christmas giving and godliness citing the holiday’s foundational myth, the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke, as historical precedent. A maudlin tale from the December 1949 issue of *Good Housekeeping* entitled “The Sinner” told of the criminal drifter Ike Steumpfig, the unlikely recipient of Christmas charity. The narrator recalls his mother welcoming Steumpfig into their home on Christmas Day despite his father’s protests. “Who ever heard of a man begging for food on Christmas,” his father ranted. “He can go to the mission downtown— or any church— or the Salvation Army— and he’ll get a meal fit for a king… Tell him to go away.” The fact that it was indeed Christmas Day only strengthened his mother’s conviction that the drifter be accommodated. “This,” his mother explained, “is the holiday for beggars. Two thousand years ago two beggars went from door to door and were turned away from every house. We will not repeat that folly in my house— not on Christmas Day.” Some years later, the reformed Steumpfig returned to ask why the family had treated him with such dignity. “Was it because it was around the holidays,” he asked, “and you were full of the spirit?”\(^{69}\)

The Christmas spirit moved celebrants to charitable giving. The act of giving honored Christmas’ founding story wherein a most worthy couple were denied the charity of others. In the absence of material gifts, Christmas celebrants could give to one another in other ways. Christmas, many wrote, was not about giving presents after all; it was

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about giving kindness and love to one another. While outlining the etiquette of Christmas tipping, Jennifer Colton explained, “[the] Christmas tip is a friendly gesture; it only happens to express itself in money.”\(^{70}\) The spirit of Christmas, for writer Ernestine Evans, was synonymous with the spirit of giving, and shopping figured prominently into her holiday season until, one year, she found herself short on funds. Evans opted instead to give her loved ones I.O.U.s for badly needed services: baby sitting, transportation, entertaining, and so forth. She concluded that, “costly presents at Christmastime are not worth half so much as promises to help out friends and families… There are so many things money will not buy.”\(^{71}\) What are gifts, asks Margery Sharp, but “tokens of yearlong kindness?”\(^{72}\) Material gifts paled in comparison to the yearlong friendship and goodwill they represented. If you were in such an unfortunate position that year-round goodwill had been lacking, magazines suggested that Christmas was the ideal time to make amends, reestablish those communal bonds, and embody the spirit.

Time and again, writers referred to the essential goodness of man and, often in the next breath, his tendency to withhold his natural benevolence from those around him. In 1950, the editors of *Good Housekeeping*, in their monthly free-form column “Town Hall,” urged readers to, “let that instinct for giving and receiving happiness burn in the spirit like the log upon the hearth, warming the cockles and dismissing doubt and distrust, melting the icy reaches of loneliness with the confidence of love.” Ann M. Davidson implored readers of *Better Homes and Gardens* to, “let yourself give,” and give the “best

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\(^{70}\) Jennifer Colton, “The Answer to Christmas Tipping,” *Good Housekeeping*, December 1950, 49. (italics in original)


gifts of all [which] will spring from the heart and not the purse.” Man possesses naturally generous tendencies, Davidson writes, but he stifles these tendencies out of fear of losing “prestige” or being perceived as a “rube.” Humanity possesses an “essential goodness,” wrote Harrison Smith, that is often obscured by political divisions. Harlan Miller, monthly contributor to Better Homes and Gardens’ “Man Next Door” column, did not advance a theory explaining why people concealed their goodwill, but he did delight in its return each Christmas season: “The outdoor Christmas lights, green and red and gold and blue and twinkling, remind me that most people are that way all year round—kind, generous, friendly, and with an occasional moment of ecstasy. But Christmas is the only time they dare to reveal themselves.” Turning back to Davidson who advised readers to “let themselves give,” the cost of withholding generosity is spiritual isolation from fellow man. But at Christmas time, by lending a helping hand to a passerby overburdened with packages, by sharing an “evanescent smile” with strangers, man may topple his self-imposed isolation and revel in the “fellow-feeling” of the season.

“Fellow-feeling.” Generosity. Goodwill. These were not the characteristics of Americans; they were the characteristics of mankind. In postwar America, commentators were quick to highlight that the goodwill exhibited as part of the American Christmas celebration could and should be applied to people around the world, for the Christmas spirit—at the risk of sounding as saccharine sweet as a Good Housekeeping short story—

held the power to unite and comfort the disparate peoples of the world. Reporting from
the battlefront on Christmas Day, 1943, an unnamed soldier-correspondent spoke of the
humanity and warmth observed in European civilian allies and the promise of Christmas:

We cannot end the war on this Christmas morning. We cannot call a truce. But
perhaps we can think a little more today of what we love and fight for. There is
much evidence in this war-tortured world of compassion and unselfishness.
There is the love of families and friends for those who are absent and in danger…
Some day Christmas, sweeping around the world, will bring chimes, songs and
the laughter of children, not the roar of deadly explosives. Some day, again.
Some Christmas Day the soldier will be home, to go to war no more. Isn’t that
what we fight for?78

Christmas 1947, when stories of “peace on earth, good will to men” plastered the
magazine pages, readers were asked to keep an eye trained to the foreign families,
friends, and children of which the war correspondent wrote. Abroad, cities had been
leveled, families fractured, and children orphaned; what of their Christmas? Ladies’
Home Journal answered: “In Austria, a boy binds his feet in rags to walk the frozen
streets to Mass… In Italy, a girl hems the frayed burlap sack that will be her holiday
dress… Hopelessness, hunger and bitter cold: this is the Christmas lot of 30,000,000
European children… Without help, millions will continue to suffer… millions more will
die this year.”79 So read the introduction to “Help!” an article outlining, in brief but no
uncertain terms, the plight of the children in the war ravaged countries of Europe as well
as Asia. Cheery illustrations dominated the pages of homemaking magazines at this time
(Ladies’ Home Journal included, though it devoted more page space to less-than-cheery
topics than did others) which makes this article's photographs of young European,

78 “We Fight for Christmas, Too,” New York Times, December 25, 1943, ProQuest Historical Newspapers,
Indian, and Chinese children, invariably sullen and unkempt looking, all the more striking. “At any cost,” the article continues, “these problems must be solved.” The strongest weapon against foreign famine and suffering was the Marshall Plan; its sole weakness lay in its “slow-shaping, tedious, work-demanding” progress. By the winter of 1947, the fate of the Marshall Plan was yet unknown. Though its general aim, relief for Europe, had been agreed upon by the nations in need and the United States, it remained to be seen whether the US would agree to the specific terms (rather, the specific needs) set by the participating European countries. “Soon, Congress—in our name—will decide whether or not to back the plan. On our support and understanding depends the measure of its success.” The stance taken by *Ladies’ Home Journal* on the issue of European aid is clear, but American support for the Marshall Plan was far from universal.  

*Ladies’ Home Journal* takes for granted, however, their readers’ support for the Marshall Plan. They question how any woman could oppose it. “Any women who has leaped at the cry of her own child must know in her heart that the distress of every child is also hers.” Two years before, the *Journal* stated that, “[We are] convinced that women in America in general wish to help feed and rehabilitate Europe.” In recognition of their readers’ assumed anxiety for welfare of “their” children in Europe, *Ladies’ Home Journal* offered instructions for charitable giving. Give to CARE, the United Nations Appeal for Children, Church World Service, Lutheran World Relief and others, they write, to make a difference, with or without the Marshall Plan. Sister magazine *Good

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*Housekeeping* likewise assumed that their readership was interested in the welfare of foreign children, particularly at Christmas time. Editor Beatrice Blackmar Gould contributed the instructional article “What You Can Do To Help,” which included enlisting local boys and girls clubs to send care packages abroad. “At Christmastime,” Gould suggested, young club members may “share their candy and greetings with children who have had no real Christmas for years.”

The *Journal* personalized the plight of European children in another, less overt way. Recall the Italian girl dressed in a tattered burlap sack; this is *her* holiday dress. And for the rest of Europe’s poor children, hunger, bitter cold, and death comprise *their* Christmas celebration. How could a mother permit her child to spend the Christmas season in agony and desperation? The juxtaposition of European ruins and American Christmas comfort (present throughout the pages of this and other magazines) is powerful and purposeful. It was not lost upon American readers that their country fared stupendously well during the war. Europe still smoldered and “meanwhile,” wrote Katherine Brush for *Good Housekeeping*, “in our own land, in all the lucky length and breadth of it, there wasn’t a building demolished by bombs, there wasn’t a brick displaced or a window broken; and the only geographical scar was one we ourselves had made— just testing— on the empty desert of New Mexico.”

This was a cause for gratitude, to be sure, but it also carried responsibilities that, prior to the war, had not entered into their minds: rebuilding Europe, for the sake of its people and for the sake of

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America’s political hegemony. Nations allowed to wallow and quarrel in postwar ruin, it was believed, were susceptible to Soviet influence.

The Christmas spirit, which had “warmed the cockles” of individual believers, moving them to embrace and give to their neighbor, took a global turn in the years following the Second World War. This global-mindedness was evident in the openly political features such as the Journal’s “Help,” as well as in monthly homemaking features that were otherwise rather circumscribed in their aims. “This is a Christmas that you’re sharing with the whole world,” wrote Ann Batchelder in her regular cooking column. “For every cooky and candy and sweetmeat you wrap up with loving hands for your friends and family you want some child in Europe to have one too.”

Author John Latham Toohey’s short story, found in the December 1948 issue of Good Housekeeping, told of a Salvation Army Santa whose personal generosity was rewarded when he was transformed into the real Santa Claus. The man embarked on his Christmas Eve mission of gift giving, stopping first at the third-floor apartment of a boy in the Bronx. Thereafter he proceeded to deliver toys to children in England, Tanganyika and, lastly, Berlin.

Ann Batchelder, taking the global Christmas to a inadvertently humorous end, gave her readers of 1946 instructions for hosting a United Nations-themed Christmas party. She greeted her readers with a meditation: “Living, as we do here, with the more or less United Nations at our front doors, our thoughts, naturally, are on one thing—peace. It’s a curious thing but, leaving wars aside, have you ever thought how little peace there is in this ball of matter whirling through space that we call the world?”

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centerpiece anchoring Batchelder’s dinner table is haphazardly studded with miniature flags from UN member nations, and the dishes themselves draw their ingredients from different countries.86

Donating to charities; sending cookies and care packages abroad and hosting internationally inclusive dinner parties were drops in the howling bucket of European relief. They were small steps, but steps nonetheless, and readers willing to recreate these editorial scenes would have far outpaced the lumbering behemoth that was the Marshall Plan, for a time. *Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping,* and *Better Homes and Gardens* did not exist to dispense international policy advice; they existed to dispense homemaking advice. What could homemakers do to improve the functionality, style, and health (in all its forms) of their household: that is presumably what readers sought inside each month’s magazine. Though the advice and instructions proffered by the aforementioned magazine features were of limited humanitarian impact, perhaps its primary value lay in its ability to improve the spiritual health of the reader and of their household. With each dollar donated, each cookie baked, a sense of goodwill and brotherhood— the Christmas spirit, in other words— could be sustained.

Though cultivated in the home, the radiant power of the Christmas spirit had the potential to affect broader change. Historian Penne Restad argues that Christmas in nineteenth-century America served a dual domestic-public purpose. “Of all holidays,” she writes, “Christmas was a perfect agency for transporting religion and religious feeling

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86 Ann Batchelder, “Let Us Have Peace,” *Ladies’ Home Journal,* December 1946, 56-57. This UN-centric issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* also featured a multi-part article “One World in America: Meet a United Nations Family in the USA” about a Belgian UN member and his young family living in New York, as well as the editorial “United Nations Beauties,” a simple photo spread of beautiful women from UN member nations.
into the home and for righting the excesses and failures of the public world.” During the nineteenth-century Christmas, charitable acts (acts that resembled the “boxing” custom more than modern charitable giving) “symbolically bridged the widening gap between rich and poor, rejuvenated the weakening bonds between church and family, and channeled the immoderation of the marketplace into charitable goodwill.”\(^{87}\) By midcentury in America, the pressing concern lay not in uniting (however weakly, temporarily) the classes but in uniting neighbors and then nations.

Lest this discussion of the “Christmas spirit” be misconstrued as simpleminded sentimentality, there were contemporary commentators who saw potential for real, tangible good in the spread of the Christmas spirit. As part of its first postwar Christmas edition, *Better Homes and Gardens* interviewed the Army captain Richard C. Davids, and asked the war-worn veteran to share “commandments of thought and action” which may sustain the newfound peace. *Better Homes* reassured readers that, in the opinion of the Captain, “there was something even the most insignificant of us could do” to keep the peace. “We asked him to repeat it, because some Christmas we want to hear his big voice hanging that song out in the night again, haunting, without mockery: *Peace on earth, good will to men*” Captain Davids issued eight “Commandments for Peace” which condemned isolationism, blind patriotism, and demagoguery while promoting global unity, free trade (to prevent resource disputes and, probably, government intervention) and love for all mankind. The people, and not the politicians, bear the heaviest responsibility for peace. If the people can, in Davids’s words, “give loyalty not to nations but to mankind” and “know your neighbors,” then they would become less vulnerable to

the sway of the hate-mongering demagogues who brought forth the late war. “There’s no other course than to work together,” Davids concludes, “we end war or we end mankind. This is our last chance.”

Christmas is not unique in its ability to foster goodwill and community; many holidays, if widely observed, have this effect. Over the course of its long and branching history, Christmas has undergone a marked process of privatization, moving from a raucous street holiday similar in spirit though not in scale to, for example, Mardi Gras or Halloween, to a domestic holiday shared between family members. According to Amitai Etzioni, who has attempted to create a unified theory of holidays, the privatization of holidays is not necessarily “disintegrative.” The private rituals of holidays, he writes, “can engender recommitment to the society at large,” provided that some recognition of society is involved in its rituals. One of Christmas’ rituals, giving, effectively links the domestic holiday back to the community. Gifts are exchanged not only between kin, but also between casual relations. The gifts need not come in the usual form of thoughtful luxury items; they may instead come in the form of Christmas bonus checks, parties and open houses or the familiar act of charity. The exchange of gifts, in all of their varied forms, created a traceable web of interconnection between individual domestic celebrations of Christmas to the larger community. A separate and un-traceable web is formed by the exchange of Christmas goodwill, carried through the “evanescent smiles,”


helping hands, and gestures of love and brotherhood that, in the eyes of a seasoned Army captain, had the power to prevent world wars.

By the mid-twentieth century, Christmas’ community-building powers were amplified by a relatively new and growing custom, one whose presence is now taken for granted each holiday season, and that is public decorations. Christmas, whose celebration had been domesticated and introverted during the nineteenth century, was gaining some semblance of its extroverted self in the form of community Christmas trees, department store decorations, and lawn decorations. One of America’s earliest documented community Christmas trees was erected in Madison Square Park (adjoining Madison Square Garden; figure 2) in 1912— the modern era, in other words, in a thoroughly modern location, and not the distant, rural past whose imagery pervaded midcentury Christmas celebration.90 “The big twentieth century Christmas tree for all the people of this big city,” began a New York Times correspondent, “has arrived … hauled on a four-horse steel girder truck.” The tree was illuminated by the Edison Company with 1,200 “lamps in various colors.” The effect was sure to dazzle. Some New Yorkers wondered at the placement of the Christmas tree out in the park:

There are many people in the city, apparently, who have not understood that the big tree is not to be in the building, Madison Square Garden, but in the big park outside, which is open to all the world— that the tree is for everybody, rich and poor, and that no one has more right to it than another.

Those in charge of the tree’s installation and accompanying program of musical performances were inundated with “courteous” letters requesting tickets to the event.

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Politely the organizers had to explain that the tree, the music, the spectacle of it all was not for a select few ticket-holders but for all passersby to freely enjoy.\footnote{“Great Xmas Tree Ready To Be Set Up,” \textit{New York Times}, December 21, 1912, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed December 15, 2015, \url{http://search.proquest.com/news/docview/97340342/B5483C2CFC974575PQ/?accountid=11667}. The tree was installed on December 20th and was to be in place for only one week. The Christmas season was not as protracted as it is today.}

By midcentury, public Christmas spectacles had only proliferated. Madison Square Garden served as a model for cities across the country. Department store
Christmas displays grew into elaborate and highly anticipated events, and individuals across the country took cues from both in decorating their home exteriors with a new array of lights (including, for a short while, fluorescent Christmas lights) and ornaments.92 “The spirit of Christmas is sharing,” wrote Good Housekeeping’s Helen Sells, and to her that includes sharing the cheer brought by outdoor Christmas decorations. Sells took readers to the Ravinia, Illinois home of the McClures whose house was “more aglow with the Christmas spirit” than any else she had seen. The McClure’s front door was cloaked in festive greenery, and their Christmas tree (one of several in the house) was strategically placed in the center of their “glassed-in porch” where it “radiates to passers-by and to those within the warmth and friendliness of this house.”93 Chris Sutton, also of Better Homes, was excited to report in 1946 that “large cellophane bells are back again” after a wartime shortage, and homeowners may once again deck their doors with them.94 These “door bells” were fairly popular, appearing in numerous decorating articles, one of which advised using bells of “vivid colors [to] make your door decorations bold enough to be seen from the street.”95 The Victorians may have driven Christmas indoors, but the promotion of outdoor decor shows that Christmas, at least in some way, was coming back out again.

The trees, bells, lights, and wreaths that came to adorn public squares and private lawns were surely pleasing to the eye, but the decorations were often a means to an end. The placement of the tree in Madison Square Park, as the Times reported in 1912, was

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meant to bridge the gap between rich and poor New Yorkers. Wealthy New Yorkers were acquainted with the tradition of erecting and decorating Christmas trees as part of the prevailing domestic Christmas tradition, but not everyone could share in that practice. The community tree was thus envisioned as a way to “cheer the people” and bring “joy and delight” to “youngsters whose stocking would otherwise hang empty.” And for the countless others who would light their homes up like Christmas trees, what might that accomplish? A ready answer has to do, understandably, with religion. Christmas Day, after all, is believed to be the birth date of Jesus, and decorating, gift giving—all the trappings of Christmas—may be linked, ever so tenuously, to the pious observance of this day. In the twentieth-first century, the increasingly rabid “Keep Christ in Christmas” factions may argue that this is the long and short of Christmas celebration. Their forefathers or, more accurately, foremothers may have disagreed. In homemaking magazines of the postwar period, Christmas decorations are imbued with a power beyond summoning the Holy Ghost. The decorations upon the McClure home of Ravinia “radiates to passers-by and to those within the warmth and friendliness of this house.”

In another decor editorial, Helen Sells spoke of how even simple Christmas decorations can “carry your abounding high spirits to everyone about you,” and that they “radiate… holiday merriment.” With Christmas decorations, homemakers could share the holiday spirit without giving a gift, without a proverbial tip of the hat. Better Homes of 1945 told of one Sacramento neighborhood for which Christmas decorating was much more than a passive affair; it was an annual communal celebration. In “Santa Street—Where

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96 Karal Ann Marling, Merry Christmas!: Celebrating America’s Greatest Holiday, 181.
Neighbors Meet,” Ramona Reeves Veglia told readers of “how, from a small beginning, 24 gregarious families created a year-round bowl of Christmas cheer that overflows for all.” This set of neighbors decorated their homes every year according to an agreed upon theme, all the while helping one another carry off their ever-growing Christmas displays. Now, after eight years in operation, the “Christmas Club” of La Purissima Way attracted sight-seers from all over the city and surrounding towns.99

What attracted people to that Sacramento Street? Better Homes does not explain. The “Christmas Club” began just eight years prior as a “prank” between two households, and only afterwards did it spread to encompass the homes of twenty-four families. The decorative showcase was not, in other words, an age-old tradition—at least, not quite. Perhaps in the Christmas Club there lay a new synthesis of old Christmas customs. As the residents of La Purissima Way opened their attractive suburban street to distant, unknown neighbors, delighting them with sky-high shooting stars, window murals, and matching Christmas trees, they were enacting an updated version of the lost custom of mumming. It was an occasion to offer hospitality and goodwill to neighbors, but this time it was not on demand, and failure to comply did not spell disaster. The Christmas Club did not cite class anxiety as the impetus for their offering but the “Lord’s injunction, ‘Love Thy Neighbor’” whoever they may be, wherever they may be. Like many other American celebrants, these neighbors wished to extend the Christmas spirit of goodwill and giving beyond their cloistered neighborhood. “These neighbors joined in volunteer war work,” Veglia reports, when “they sponsored their own food and clothing collection for the

people of Europe.” In the center of La Purissima Way, there stood a tall lighted Christmas tree “guarded” by a kneeling angel bearing the message “Peace on Earth.”

In their own little way, the people of this neighborhood were living up to that commandment. If only it could last all year.

Much is made of the introverted nature of the Christmas holiday, and indeed it has more markings of a domestic celebration than a carnivalesque event, but the holiday provokes a mindset of communitas and generosity unbounded by walls and, in the wake of a world war, unbounded by national borders. Within their own homes, celebrants could spread goodwill through gifts and cheering decorations, and by offering uncommon hospitality to incoming guests the spirit is spread even further. Goodwill could radiate outward through individual kind deeds, and through decorations in town squares and on individual homes. The war had alerted Americans to the fact that their “community” did not end at water’s edge but applied to all of humanity, and they remembered their distant brethren at Christmas. There are other forces afoot, of course. How much of the Christmastime charity was spurred by intense guilt? And how many of those Christmas light on La Purissima Way owe their placement solely to NOMA Christmas light advertisements of the time? In the latter case, commercialization certainly played a part, but so did contemplation of Christmas’s relevance in a new age and to new generations.

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100 Ramona Reeves Veglia, “Santa Street— Where Neighbors Meet,” 18.
Chapter 4

Tiny Tots

Take any sample of Christmastime magazine editorials from the early Cold War period, be it from Better Homes and Gardens, Good Housekeeping or any other mainstream publication, and you will find certain elements common to them all. No decor tutorial is without bristling, full evergreen arrangements, studded with toys or other baubles; no holiday menu without playfully decorated cookies and coordinating hors d’oeuvres. Though hints of motherly exasperation do creep in, they quickly vanish, and the faces of the families celebrating Christmas within her carefully crafted Christmas wonderland are all happy, all satisfied. The picture of Christmas in the latter 1940s is a rosy one indeed, but would you expect anything different from publications whose raison d’être was, as Good Housekeeping’s founding editor wrote, to “produce and perpetuate perfection… in the Household.”

How well these images complement the prevailing stereotype of the Cold War household: it was meticulously kept, yes, but, more importantly, it was animated by a vapid self-contentedness, the same energy which powered the “happy housewife heroine” of which Betty Friedan would write.

But the “happy housewife heroine” Friedan identified in mid-twentieth-century

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consumer culture was a mythic one, and that was no less the case during the Christmas season, the time of the year when spirits were supposed to be at their highest. Couched among the holiday homemaking columns, like ornaments on a tree, are hints that the trappings of Christmas served to mask and mediate anxieties of the age. Perhaps foremost among these postwar anxieties was that concerning childrearing in the atomic age. Parents, witness to and participants of the late war, the deadliest in human history, had reason to fear that their children’s world could also become engulfed in conflict, this time made all the more dire by recent advancements in weapons technology. Now, there need not be a war to end wars, but a simple detonation. Such bleak pictures of the future could be avoided, it was believed, if the younger generations could be dissuaded and protected from following in their parents’ footsteps. Christmas was imbued with special abilities to do just that. Parents indulge their children at Christmas. By doing so, parents succeeded in prolonging the joy and innocence of childhood and stave off their young ones’ inevitable entrance into the adult world.

In this way, parents of the latter 1940s sustained the practices and sentiments that had characterized Christmas for the better part of a century, however, they were imbued with significance unique to the post-World War II age. In the eyes of Christmas celebrants a century before, children were also the focal point of the holiday, but the holiday did not begin that way. Christmas arrived piecemeal to the United States over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it brought with it certain gift giving practices. Among these was mumming, an event during which roving bands of masked revelers demanded food and drink of, if not entrance into, the homes of well-
heeled neighbors. As evinced by mumming, Christmas occasioned a temporary lapse in social order, during which people living on the lower rungs of society were empowered to demand gifts from those at the top. This was not a permanent devolution but a temporary release valve on any accumulated social tensions. With the holiday season over, and the valve reset, masters and patrons resumed their privileged positions atop a resolidified social pyramid. Mumming faded over the course of the nineteenth century, particularly in growing urban areas where inhabitants viewed the prospect of entertaining disguised revelers with increasing circumspection. The charitable spirit of mumming found an outlet elsewhere, however, as children took the place of the poor as the recipients of Christmastime gifts.

Children’s new, and ever strengthening, position as the primary recipients of Christmas giving was made possible by broader shifts in nineteenth-century American society and culture. These shifts were first evident in cities which underwent demographic changes with the arrival of American migrants and European immigrants; economic change with the expansion of western agricultural lands and advent of industrialized production; and even structural changes as humanity crowded into increasingly congested city blocks. As previously mentioned, the prospect of entertaining one’s “neighbors” at Christmastime lost appeal as the neighborhood itself took on an air of foreignness and danger. This development drove Christmas celebration indoors, into a domestic world well equipped to develop the callithumpian holiday’s softer, more sober

qualities. The market revolution of the eighteenth century also occasioned a revolution of middle class, white household and family management. A rift between home and the market, two spheres of living that were theretofore conjoined, opened slowly and unevenly across the United States. The succeeding market model saw men and women placed into separate productive spheres and their prescribed roles changed accordingly. The man’s sphere was outside of the home and demanded business acumen and, at times, ruthlessness; meanwhile the woman’s sphere was inside the home, and foremost among her duties was protecting her children from corrupting influences of the outside world.

With diminished economic responsibilities, the duties of child-rearing and housekeeping sat centerstage in the lives of middle class, urban women. Early women’s magazines such as Godey’s Lady’s Book attest to the elevated status of domesticity. The founder of this magazine claimed that its intention was “to subserve the best interests of Woman” and, as such, it contained articles on proper exercise regimes for young girls, the education of children and cautionary tales of mothers who shirked their domestic duties. In one such story from 1840, a young mother was so confounded by household chores that she persuades her reluctant husband to abandon their family home for life in a boarding house. Boarding house living presents unique and unforeseen problems: lack of privacy, insufficient food, and imposing neighbors; all of which cause the mother to doubt her decision to “board,” but she persists. However, when her sweet son is induced to violence and nearly killed by another, much coarser boarding house boy, the mother

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finally decides to abandon the venture and return to the relative bliss of housekeeping.\textsuperscript{108} Order is restored. This story reveals what can happen when mothers abandon their domestic duties. While the husband was merely disgruntled, the children were endangered.

As illustrated by \textit{Godey’s} sentimental tale, children required the unflagging attention of dutiful mothers to protect them from the corrupting influence of, in this case, young ruffians. The market revolution precipitated social change among children as well as adults. Children, like women, were once a part of household economic production. At a certain age, boys and girls could complete agricultural labor and produce goods for home consumption or sale. As the nineteenth century wore on, work opportunities for children diminished and, as a result, so too did their status as financial assets. By the mid-nineteenth century, birth rates had dropped from seven children per household to five (\textit{Godey’s} beleaguered boarding home mother had three). Children were no longer viewed as productive members of a household economy; instead, as Elizabeth H. Pleck so puts it, children become repositories of virtue.\textsuperscript{109} They were, in other words, naturally moral creatures and their sweet tendencies required protection. While this belief in children’s innate morality and sweetness pervaded daily life, Christmas was a recommitment ceremony during which these qualities were purposefully celebrated.

As it existed in mid-twentieth-century America, Christmas was an amalgamation of numerous cultural and historical currents. Few of these currents, oddly enough, are traceable to the Bible or religious texts derivative of it. The “reason for the season,” the

nativity story was, however, instrumental in shaping Christmas’ identity as a children’s holiday. Once more Victorian ideals are afoot. Middle class Americans of the Victorian era not only embraced the idea of a homebound and family-oriented Christmas but also the idea that this celebration was an approximation of the nativity scene, with American mother and child standing in for Mary and the Christ Child. This child-Christ connection complements the conception of children as “repositories” and embodiments of the virtues that adults must abandon upon entry to the workaday world.¹¹⁰

Christmas and children were thus firmly intertwined by the mid-twentieth century. Christmases of the Cold War were not the first to celebrate the perceived sweetness and faith of children, and it is not the intention of this essay to argue so. In order for the symbols and customs of any holiday to be sustained through the passage of time and succession of generations, they must be born again and imbued with new meaning to satisfy the psychic demands of the times. If the mother of 1850 used Christmas to combat encroaching market forces, then the mother of 1950s used it to counter the fallout of global war.

Children were indispensable to this process. Having not yet imbibed anything of national prejudice or animosity, children were seen as uniquely capable of transcending geopolitical strife. However, this would require preserving the inherently peaceful and nonjudgmental nature of children. Children held the hope of a fresh start, something which the nation craved. A generation had come of age during the Great Depression, only to be greeted into adulthood by the deadliest war in human history. Hundreds of thousands of Americans had lost their lives in that war while tens of millions around the

globe perished, many of them at the hands of American soldiers, some by atom bomb. “How did it get this far,” they asked, “and how can we get back out?” As the dust settled, Americans groped and found a way out. They found comfort in the Christmas holiday which signaled, as it always had, a return to a timeless, if fictional, idyll. They found comfort in family and, in particular, in children. Children, who were regarded as inherently innocent, apolitical, and nonjudgmental embodied the precise characteristics required to remove the nation from strife. Not only could children heal the present wounds, they had the potential to erase war from mankind’s future.

The women who followed the advice found in postwar homemaking magazines did so at a time when the American family took on special symbolic importance. With the cessation of war, servicemen stationed abroad returned home to reunite with their families and, with some time, to start families of their own. Images of the reunited American family figure prominently in narratives of the period. A Coca-Cola advertisement from 1945 showcases a homey scene wherein a uniformed serviceman reclines on a sofa while hoisting his infant child into the air, perhaps for the first time. In front of the sofa sits the father’s fully loaded haversack, and behind stands the decorated and illuminated Christmas tree. “Time of all times,” begins the narration, “Home at last… to wife, to child and to family. With Christmas in the air and the tree lighted brightly. All the dreams of a lifetime rolled into one moment.” Christmas Day is depicted as a unique moment during which everything that is good, “all the dreams of a lifetime,” finally crystallize with the infant child at its heart. Frank McDonough painted a similar picture for readers of *Better Homes and Gardens* when he described the Christmas of

1945 with its “many thousands of children, some of them just becoming acquainted with fathers whom they have not seen before.” These children, McDonough predicted, “will wake Daddy in the dark morning hours, eager to see what Santa brought and to pile on the bed with all the happy activity of excited puppies.”

Not only were families being reunited; they began to grow at a historic rate. In the years between World War I and World War II, the national fertility rate had fallen from 3.3 to 2.1 children per woman, a rate scarcely above replacement level. The fertility rate grew modestly during World War II but, afterward, it soared, reaching 3.6 children per woman by 1957. For the American family, the postwar years were not a return to normalcy but an entrance into a new society: empowered, prosperous, anxious, and, as shown by contemporary magazines, baby-crazed. Many other companies rushed to join Coca-Cola in celebrating the founding of new American families, though few managed to rival Coke’s touching sentimentality. The Lovell Manufacturing Company, for example, the makers of electric washing machines and laundry wringers, stamped this question atop a 1947 advertisement: “Expecting?” followed by, in much smaller text, “— to buy a new washer?” The Bell Telephone System, in a heavy-handed reference to the ongoing baby boom and, one assumes, in an attempt appeal to young families, asked readers if they had, “Heard about our ‘birth rate?’” “Right next to the record number of new babies,” continues the ad, “put the record number of new telephones!” There is nary a telephone in sight; instead, half of the advertisement’s page space is devoted to a close-

up photograph of an infant’s face. A spate of articles from the late 1940s profiling the lifestyles of particularly fecund American families fed into the national baby craze. The Welches and Crawfords, both of Maine, and the Burgers of Kansas City cared for seven, fourteen, and six children, respectively, and found themselves the subject of lengthy, highly laudatory magazine profiles.115

The baby boom raised questions about much more than telephones or how to properly outfit the laundry room. How, for instance, should young families celebrate Christmas with their new baby? Good Housekeeping of 1950 sought to answer such questions with their feature “Christmas Is For Children.” Pediatrician Dr. Josephine H. Kenyon answered questions such as: “How can parents keep their child from becoming over-excited at Christmas time?” “How can a child be made to eat breakfast on Christmas morning?” “What is the best method of getting a child to sleep after such a festive day?” Kenyon advised parents to adhere to the child’s normal daily routine as much as possible on Christmas Day, but to also expect “excitement” on this unusual day. When asked about the risk of spoiling a child at Christmas time, Kenyon responds that a “happy Christmas” will not spoil a child as long as the child’s gifts are not too lavish nor the attention he receives “undue.”116

If parents needed help determining what attention was “due” to children at Christmastime, these same magazines were at the ready with their particular brand of holiday advice. Magazines frequently recommended celebrating the season with

recitations of classic Christmas literature before young listeners. Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, one of Christmas’s founding documents, was considered a “splendid gift” for families to read aloud on Christmas Eve, once the “stockings were hung and the last sparkling ornament has been dangled from the tree.”¹¹⁷ *Ladies’ Home Journal* suggested that children need not wait for their parents to stage a formal recitation; they could listen to *A Christmas Carol* any time they pleased by purchasing the story on record, narrated by Lionel Barrymore.¹¹⁸ Purchasing a copy of *A Christmas Carol*, no matter its physical form, may have proven redundant given the frequency with which magazines quoted from the story. *Good Housekeeping* provided passages from the tale in both its 1945 and 1947 Christmas editions.¹¹⁹ *A Christmas Carol* was joined by other ritual texts: Clement Clark Moore’s *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, Bible passages, and the singing of Christmas carols. The annual revival of these stories and songs was a way for parents to impart the texts’ inherent lessons to their children. With the recitation of *A Christmas Carol*, the most popular of them all, parents could caution their children against the miserly ways exhibited by the unreformed Ebenezer Scrooge and guide them instead toward the faith, hope, and familial love embodied in Scrooge’s impoverished clerk, Bob Cratchit. Dickens’s *Carol* was a century old by 1943, and it continues to be one of the most popular, and riffed-upon, of the Christmas stories, a testament to the ongoing demand for a moralizing tale condemning greed and self-absorption.

Ritual recitations of familiar stories would have taken place against a much larger backdrop of Christmas activities intended to entice and indulge children. Few

Christmastime events excited children more than the preparation of special holidays meals and desserts. The holiday season could entail an intense schedule of entertaining and hosting duties, especially if a homemaker followed the around-the-clock schedule of food preparation prescribed in magazines. *Better Homes and Gardens* illustrated well the congestion of the Christmas season when it provided readers with four different menus, comprised of thirty-eight distinct menu items, designed for use at the hostess’s own tree trimming party, Christmas afternoon luncheon, Christmas Eve reception, and, of course, at the end-of-year open house.120 Though already overlaiden with recipes (the term “groaning board” comes to mind) and food service tricks, magazines frequently recommend dedicating extra time and attention to creating menu items to please children. With each of these menu items, the object is not to simply satisfy the unsophisticated palates of young diners, but to delight them with the food’s festive appearance. Baking Christmas cookies, cut into fun shapes and bedecked in candies, now had the added bonus of transforming one’s kitchen into an “exciting spot… where the neighborhood youngsters” could convene.121 Children’s favorite fictional characters—Santa Claus, prancing reindeer, and even Mother Goose—could come alive in “Storybook Cookies for Christmas.”122 Coconut snowball confections were shaped by “loving hands” with the object of eliciting a “big eyed reception… from the youngsters” at the Christmas buffet.123

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Festive Christmas recipes were joined by equally fun and kid-friendly decorating suggestions. Fae Huttenlocher of *Better Homes and Gardens* instructed mothers to make Christmas “a family enterprise” by enlisting children to help in decorating. Huttenlocher, whose scrap-heavy decorating ideas of 1945 still smack of wartime material restrictions, suggested having children draw snowy scenes onto window panes using soap.124

Weighing in on good Christmas practices, *New York Times* columnist Catherine Mackenzie listed trimming the tree as one of the “best things” about Christmas. Among those trimmings, the cheeriest were those simple ones made by children: paper chains, cardboard cut-outs, and popcorn garlands.125 A contributing reader of *Better Homes and Gardens* argued that her children’s handmade Christmas decorations were of greater sentimental value than mass produced ones, while other writers highlighted the sense of pride children derived from seeing their handicrafts put on display.126 *Better Homes* appealed to young readers directly in their regular column “The Merry-Go-Round” whose December 1946 feature asked, “How would you like to make some trims for the big tree which has been set up in the living room?” This question was followed by kid-friendly instructions for creating personal paper Christmas trees and elf ornaments from tracing papers and doilies.127

Even Christmas decorations that were not kid-crafted were created with young audiences in mind. *Good Housekeeping* suggested that homemakers incorporate “junior’s

sled,” piled with brightly wrapped gifts, into their Christmas dinner centerpiece, a sight that surely would have delighted young and old alike, especially when “Dad, officiating as Santa Claus,” began to distribute the gifts.\footnote{128} At Christmas 1946, Chris Hutton of \textit{Better Homes} provided readers with three possible decorative themes for their Christmas tree, two of which were expressly designed to be engaging for children. “A youngster would love these other trees covered in small cars, planes, etc.” she writes, while another tree studded with plush toys was “ideal for a shut-in child.”\footnote{129} Reindeer cookies, paper chains, elves, toy cars, and plush animals: What was Christmas but the fever dream of a five-year-old?

Adults may have been losing ground with each passing Christmas. By 1947, Marion Cressey of \textit{Better Homes} suggested involving children in a Christmas pastime traditionally the reserve of older sets: Christmas parties. She suggested to readers, “Let the youngsters help you entertain,” and in so doing parents may save themselves from the “hovering worry” that their attention-deprived children will “act up” during the Christmas party. Children may be effectively, and peacefully, incorporated into adult parties if they are given menial tasks to complete, such as passing out hors d’oeuvres, or coached beforehand in making small talk. Hosts courted “unhappy incidents” when they employed their youngsters to collect coats and refill glasses, but the risk was worth the reward of having socially skilled children.\footnote{130} Parents were also advised to let children partake in Christmas card writing and the creation of homemade Christmas presents to

exchange among their friends.\textsuperscript{131} If children were incorporated into, and at times
dictating, the decor, food, and even dinner party repartee of Christmas, there can be no
doubt in the holiday’s transition from debauched street festival to a sentimental domestic
affair was nearing completion. Children were depicted as the stars, and parents merely
“set the stage.”\textsuperscript{132} Children took top billing in festivities and the top spot “of any
Christmas list, for this is their day. From the first pop out of bed at dawn to the last weary
step upstairs, every keyed-up moment is theirs.”\textsuperscript{133}

Some Christmas rituals, however, were off limits to children. Though they were
the recipients of his endless generosity, children were not supposed to play a part in
staging the annual visit from Santa Claus. This ritual was under the strict and exclusive
purview of adult celebrants. Yet no other custom had done more to cement Christmas’s
status as a children’s holiday than that of Santa Claus. Like Christmas itself, the history
of St. Nick is far from tidy, but his station in American popular culture was secure by the
outbreak of World War II. During the war, Santa Claus became a figure of reassurance
and of happy normalcy. On Christmas Eve, 1941, mere weeks after the attack on Pearl
Harbor, Winston Churchill addressed the American people, referencing Santa Claus as a
means of prolonging children’s Christmas cheer in the face of great geopolitical
uncertainty:

Here then for one night only, each home throughout the English-speaking world,
should be a brightly lighted island of happiness and peace. Let the children have
their night of fun and laughter; let the gifts of Father Christmas delight their

\textsuperscript{131} “Young Mothers’ Exchange: Holiday Fun— Junior Size,” \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, December 1946, 73.
\textsuperscript{132} Fae Huttenlocher, “And All Through the House Merry Christmas,” \textit{Better Homes and Gardens},
December 1949, 41-43.
\textsuperscript{133} “Oh, What a Wonderful Christmas,” \textit{Good Housekeeping}, December 1945, 212.
thoughts; let us share to the full in their unstinted pleasure, before we turn again to
the stern tasks in the year that lies before us.134

The newspapers of the war and post-war eras are rife with accounts of orphanages
and children’s hospitals receiving special visits from Santa Claus, suggesting that the
custom was viewed as essential to a child’s Christmas experience. Some child
psychiatrists, however, took aim at Santa Claus as a figure ill-suited for the new “atomic
age” of science. These detractors warned that maintaining the myth of Santa Claus would
hinder children’s ability to distinguish fantasy from reality and their potential to become
self-reliant adults.135 Better Homes and Gardens weighed in on the debate by publishing
two competing reader-submitted essays: one defending the vital place of the Santa Claus
myth, and another decrying it as trickery.136

The relative merits of Santa Claus are debatable, but what is certain is that the
Santa Claus myth prevailed, and that a parent’s choice to maintain the mythology did
serve to prolong a childlike fantasy world. The protest of the naysaying psychiatrists
received ample coverage in the press, prompting Catherine Mackenzie, the author of the
New York Times’ parenting column, to respond. In a piece entitled “Is Santa a Menace,”
Mackenzie reported poll findings indicating that most “specialists and educators”
endorsed Santa Claus, citing that children needed both fantasy and reality in their lives.
“Let a child be a child,” they said. Mackenzie later noted that measures to preserve
childhood wonder were especially crucial in the so-called atomic age. In the wake of the

135 “Atomic Age Explodes Santa Claus Myth, Makes Fantasy Folly, Psychiatrist Says,” New York Times,
atomic bombing of Japan “as adults tried to grasp the world-shattering concept of their own obsolescence, what did the children say? ‘We knew all about that from the funnies!’” Echoing this sentiment, Marjorie K. Reynolds, who wrote to Better Homes in defense of Santa Claus, argued that, “the time is short when our children can live the beautiful legend of Santa Claus.” “Soon,” writes Reynolds, those precious years of faith will be gone, “and our babies will be saying, ‘Santa is the bunk.’”

To this commentator, the thought of children losing faith in the fantastic was troubling. Now more than ever, in the wake of atomic catastrophe, children’s innocence was on the line, and propagating the myth Santa Claus was one thing American parents could do to protect it.

The imperative of Santa Claus moved some parents to uncommon action. On December 14, 1945, the New York Times reported that a group of fathers had convened in the Hotel New Yorker to attend a Santa class. In order to play Santa well, fathers must not be too loud or theatrical, nor should they leave the red suit where it could be easily found by their children. According to the course’s instructor, the purpose of playing Santa was not to fool the children but to share an imaginative story with them. As such, Santa Claus is equally important to children who do, and do not, believe the myth.

Ladies’ Home Journal of 1947 reported that the Santa schools were still up and running. This one in Albion, New York focused on churning out grade-A department store Santa

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Clauses, drilling its students (“good natured family men preferred”) in disciplines such as “How to Laugh, How to Wear Whiskers, Christmas Legends, and Child Psychology.”  

Visiting the department store Santa Claus was yet another midcentury Christmas ritual in which children could participate but not plan. Better Homes and Gardens offered its 1946 readers an in-depth look into the Santa business when it profiled 72-year-old Leonidas Beall, the Santa-in-residence at Washington DC’s Woodward and Lothrop department store. Bell related Christmas stories from his humble upbringing in rural Iowa, and the columnists noted how his easy manner put every “starry eyed” young visitor at ease. “There is no feeling in the world,” according to Beall, “like the one that comes from making children happy.” A fine sentiment, but not everyone was so starry-eyed for department store Santa Clauses. An editor of Good Housekeeping bemoaned the recent proliferation of Santa Clauses— one for every street corner, doorway, and toy section, “a rash of them, red and ubiquitous as measles.” This commentator was not bothered by the commercialized Christmas personified in Santa Claus, nor by the charitable donations these costumed men frequently solicited; rather, they feared that this “rash” of Santas may compromise their children’s faith in the myth altogether. “Now, how do they expect us to explain it to the children… With a cotton-bearded, dingy old fellow at every entrance of every store in every block, just how will we maintain the children’s faith? They lose all their young illusions too soon as it is!” In response to this exclamation, one of the editors elderly friends retorted:

Lose all illusions? Do you really think so, really… Why, I don’t believe so. After all, can’t you remember that as a child nothing surprised you? A saint on every corner, gnomes under the staircase, a baby brother for a Christmas present—

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nothing was disenchanted, anything could happen… And I, for one, am not certain that I don’t still believe in Santa Claus!

This spirited grandmother was more optimistic than the average commentator about the resilience of childish faith. Many more expressed apprehension that their babies were growing up too quickly and losing those treasured qualities of innocence, kindness and ignorance of the world.

Seeing “a saint on every corner” apparently did little to dampen some children’s belief in Santa Claus. One mother explained to Better Homes readers that her children, who were devout followers of Saint Nicholas, had contrived a fairly sophisticated scenario to explain the profusion of red-suited men. “A man isn’t Santa Claus just because he wears a red suit,” she explained. To her children, “These fellows are merely dressed up to help collect money for Santa.”

There was one true Santa, one keeper of the “Naughty List” who decided whether children received their preferred gift or the coal and switches of Christmas legend. Giving children gifts on behalf of Santa Claus and, again, on behalf of one’s self was (and remains) arguably the most indulgent of Christmas customs, yet many wrote fondly of Christmas Day pandemonium occasioned by it. “Watch their eyes light up,” as children behold their new doll furniture. In the home of Marjorie Reynolds, she and her husband “wait for an overdose of excitement to awaken our sleepyheads. Soon we hear little feet jumping out of bed and bedroom doors bursting open. Down the stairs they dash, tumbling over each other to reach the tree first— it’s a sight we shall never forget.”

early morning stampede? “What Christmas present can bring more joy and lasting happiness than a rollicking, lovable pup,” the gift guaranteed to elicit delighted squeals.145

The nineteenth century domestication of Christmas helps to explain why children became the primary recipients of Christmas gifts, yet it does explain why they remained in that position over a century later. Writing as a contemporary of these postwar families, sociologist James H. Barnett explained that the gift-giving impulse was animated by “affection and devotion to children.” “Powerful emotions,” he continues, “center about the belief that children ought to have a happy Christmas. This means that they should receive gifts from Santa Claus and have a Christmas tree, accompanied by excitement and the affection of adults,” which took its form, not surprisingly, as even more presents. Barnett concluded that, in the eyes of many Americans, getting gifts from Santa Claus on Christmas was a child’s “natural right.”146 Barnett’s assessment, though it may sound extreme, perfectly complements Good Housekeeping’s Christmas greeting of 1949 which read, “May ecstasy blaze on the faces of the children and love be a guest at your table, and may every little girl awake on Christmas morning to find a sleepy doll in her stocking.”147

Parental love and affection came in the form of Christmas gifts. This is not to say that parents expressed love for their children on Christmas Day only, leaving the poor child to wonder and doubt for the rest of the year. Neither was Thankgiving the only day allotted to thankfulness, nor the Fourth of July the only outlet for pent-up patriotism.

Each of these holidays allowed celebrants to recommit to commonly held and cherished beliefs. For Christmas, this meant making a special, concerted effort to affirm one's love for their family, and their children in particular. Popular parenting tracts and advice of the latter 1940s quieted concerns that gift-giving may spoil children. In an article entitled “Give Them a Chance to Be Cheerful,” author Marjorie Holmes urged parents to take their children’s occasional bouts of sadness to heart. “While the cause of a youngster’s discontent may seem trifling to us,” she explains, “to him it may be grave indeed.” Holmes tells parents that they must act fast to remedy their child’s foul moods lest he “fall into the habit of unhappiness.” According to Holmes, parents should make sure that their children have the same toys as their playmates; give their children an allowance; say “Yes” more often to their requests, and remain cheerful in their presence, for all of these are conditions conducive to childhood happiness. To give was to love, not to spoil.

Holmes was far from alone in this opinion. Her advice echoed that found in the most popular childrearing book of the decade (and of the century), Benjamin Spock’s Common Sense Book of Baby and Childcare. Published in 1946, Spock’s Common Sense Book advocated a relaxed approach to childrearing and discouraged authoritarian parenting characterized by regimented schedules, harsh discipline, and willful inattention to children’s emotional needs. Spock reassured parents that “the natural loving care that kindly parents give their children is a hundred times for valuable than their knowing how to pin a diaper on just right.” Successful parenting came not with the perfection of

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150 Benjamin Spock, The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, 3.
feeding schedules, safety pin techniques, and table manners; it came with love. When people chose to have children, Spock argued, they did so because:

…They love children and want some of their very own. They also love children because they remember being loved so much by their parents in their own childhood. Taking care of their children, seeing them grow and develop into fine people, gives most parents—despite the hard work—their greatest satisfaction in life. This is creation. This is our visible immortality. Pride in other worldly accomplishments is usually weak in comparison.\(^{151}\)

Spock’s words are at once comforting and unsettling. All children need to be happy is to be loved, and one’s child is their living legacy to the world. What world were children inheriting?

On Christmas Day, 1949, the last Christmas of the decade, the New York Times featured a multi-page article and photomontage composed by historian Henry Steele Commager. Commager, in as succinct a manner as could be expected for such a task, attempted to recapitulate the defining events, people, and ideas of the twentieth-century thus far. Henry Ford and Albert Einstein; the rise of Bolshevism and the League of Nations; women’s suffrage, the stock market crash, and the New Deal—these all made the cut, but they disappeared in the shadow of the twentieth century’s greatest legacy: war. “The central and overshadowing fact of the twentieth century is, of course, war. In no other period of history has so much of the globe been engulfed in war; in no other era has war inflicted so great ravages, taken so heavy a toll on life and civilization, as in our own time.” How does one escape the living legacy of their “own time” but by embracing the future yet unmarred by it, and the children who would be its architects?

\(^{151}\) Spock, 5.
Reflecting on the war, mere months after its conclusion, Better Homes editor Frank McDonough explained how he and others had been able to celebrate Christmas, the most joyous of holidays, while daily imbibing bitter news from the battlefront. “Those of us who were wise,” he explained, sought “happiness where it might be found— in the hearts of children.” Children, he continues, “knowing nothing of the world, kept alive the true Christmas spirit.” It took, in other words, a childlike ignorance and freedom from nationalistic prejudice to sustain “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to man,” the defining qualities of the Christmas spirit. Adults, whose greatest living legacy was that of war and brutality, could no longer live up to that commandment.

McDonough was not alone in finding inspiration through children. Ladies’ Home Journal of 1945 featured a letter from reader Carrie Burnette who related her story of Christmastime struggle and deliverance. Christmas of 1938 found Carrie and her husband virtually penniless and unable to buy Christmas presents for their five children. Despite their mother’s repeated statements to the contrary, the Burnette children trusted that Santa Claus would visit them with gifts this cold Christmas Eve. As Carrie settled in for an evening spent reading Christmas stories and singing carols, a knock came at the door. Standing in the threshold was a neighbor bearing gifts and a story for the children: “Well, children, Santa sent me,” he said. “He can’t get around to everyone, and I am helping him.” With full stockings, happy children, and even a new dress for herself, Burnette asked, “Do you wonder at my believing in a real Santa Claus?” She reflected back upon

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her children’s dogged belief in Santa’s favor and remarked that, “Just as the children, I am sure that we have the faith, some way our needs will be met.”

There was a precious short window of time—five, maybe six years, according to one mother—during which children may fully, faithfully embrace the wonder of Christmas. A child must be young to believe in Santa Claus, to go starry-eyed in his presence, to gawk at coconut snowballs, to proudly drape his paper chain across the living room mantle, to reel and tumble over the chance to open Christmas presents, and return to bed for a fitful night’s sleep. A child must be young, and still in possession of the blind faith, innocence, and wonder that everyone must leave behind upon entering adulthood.

For the children of Europe, that transition had been violently foisted upon them, and the postwar years offered no immediate relief. As Europe limped back to life, the full extent of its misery revealed itself; towns had been leveled, populations decimated, and thousands of orphaned children left in the rubble. Good Housekeeping sent wishes for “the happiest, most wonderful Christmas ever” to its readers, their families and to “all the children of the world.” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, always the more conscientious of the sister magazines, gave readers a clear-cut path to fulfilling such kind wishes. Editor Beatrice Blackmar-Gould provided a list of international charities funding civilian relief efforts and advised readers to support the UN Relief and Rehabilitation

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Administration. In the same issue, a piece entitled simply “Help” painted a dire picture of European children’s Christmases, with rag-clad feet and a “Christmas dress” cut from a discarded burlap sack. “This is the Christmas lot of 30,000,000 European children… What can we do?” And what can we do for the children at home? The answer broadcast itself, loud and clear, from every recipe, house tour, and letter to the editor: take time, during this and every Christmas holiday, to safeguard one’s own children from want, and nurture their natural wonder, faith, and goodness so that it may serve them, and the world, for as long as possible.

Midcentury Americans homemakers, like their predecessors a century before, conceived of the home and family as a refuge from disagreeable societal forces encountered during the workaday world. Self-interest, competition, deception, amorality, brutality—these were but a few of the tensions against which Americans wished to protect their family lives. They did so while resisting the innate knowledge that each family member is, or will be someday, in possession of these unsavory qualities. In their dealings with one another, family members were expected to transcend their vices lest the sanctity and safety of “family” be violated. To strengthen the conception of family life as a refuge, families performed certain rituals, a category of activities under which holidays, and certainly Christmas, squarely falls. Nowhere was a child safer from corrupting societal forces than in the home, and at no time was he safer than at Christmas when these strengthening rituals, like gift-giving, cooking, and decorating, took center stage.

And the Christmases of the post-war period were imbued with a power and significance, unique to their time, to ameliorate hostilities, recommit to children, and recommit to a peaceful future. This sentiment moved homemaking columnists, whose medium barred them from robust political commentary, to issue calls like the following: “Let’s take Christmas to heart this year and give it a great big hug. Let’s have greener greens and redder holly, and bigger, fatter, bunches of mistletoe. Let’s have more carols, more hymns, softer candlelight, and more stars in children’s eyes.”\textsuperscript{159} This call did not go out to everyone; it went out to homemakers, and they alone could respond.

Chapter 5

Deck the Halls

Gingerly poking his capped head around the corner, a cartoon Santa Claus with a wooly beard and ruffled cuffs, catches the eye of his *Good Housekeeping* readers. He extends his arm out to readers and lifts a declaratory finger, warning them that, “Four weeks to Christmas is not so long as you think.” He offers a voluminous “reminder list” of chores for his largely female audience to complete in four-week’s time, “to help your Christmas plans run smoothly.” But this was the Christmas of 1945, an occasion which, for many readers, had indeed been a long time coming. It was to be the first peacetime Christmas for the US in four years—six, counting the years spent collectively tensing at the prospect of intervention. Prior to the war, far from basking in the glow of Christmas trees and brilliant gifts, the US had endured over a decade on the treadmill of economic depression. For the last fifteen years, a pall of privation and resulting irony had hung over the holiday season. Christmas 1945 was to be different. Look no further than the successive covers of *Good Housekeeping* for an apt illustration. The December cover from 1944 featured a young girl lying in bed, head turned upward toward the distant star of Bethlehem, hands clutched in innocent prayer. A year later, the cover features another little girl, this time gazing gaily at the reader, hands clutching instead a new doll and a candy cane. Beneath her, printed on an unfurled ribbon, are the words, “Merry Christmas to America” (figure 3).

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The readers of *Good Housekeeping* and its sister magazines (*Better Homes and Gardens* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*) who represented white middle class, “middlebrow” American women, had been eagerly awaiting the return of a truly “merry Christmas,” imbued with the sweet joy and sincerity of spirit embodied by 1945’s December cover girl.161 That same month, Frank McDonough of *Better Homes* reassured his readers that it was, at last, time to lift the “false face” of wartime Christmas, a protective mask of false cheer worn by celebrants “lest the truth” of the times “crush [them].”162 The holiday edition of *Ladies’ Home Journal* was similarly optimistic, expectant even, with its cover

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161 Herbert Raymond Mayes, *The Magazine Maze: A Prejudiced Perspective* (New York City: Doubleday, 1980), 75. Herbert Mayes was the editor of *Good Housekeeping* from 1938 to 1958, and he described his readers as “middlebrow.” Magazines which catered to a more “high brow” audience included *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*.

art featuring a mother and daughter sitting side by side on a snowy white sofa, knitting father a Christmas surprise: baby booties, both pink and blue. “Lights will twinkle gaily this Christmas eve,” observed a Seagram’s whiskey ad, and “Hearts will be overflowing with gladness as families, reunited, toast the Yuletide season,” the first “Christmas of world peace in so many grim years.” With the cessation of war came great hope for sustained peace and the reestablishment of traditional family life, and the Christmas holiday served as an outlet for the ritualized expression of these postwar ideals. With few exceptions, the work of Christmas fell to female homemakers, saddling them with the responsibility of affirming ideals that, in truth, were difficult to locate in postwar America. This chapter will provide greater coverage of the specific work assigned to female homemakers by midcentury magazines and the larger familial and social responsibilities that work conferred.

For women, the work of Christmas was significant. To complete, for instance, the 21-point “reminder list” provided by Good Housekeeping’s friendly Santa Claus would have been a herculean feat. “Make your gift list and complete your shopping as quickly as possible,” he urges, reminding readers that fruit boxes and monogrammed gifts require weeks for proper assembly and shipment. Subsequent commandments include buying “exciting new lights” for the Christmas tree, ordering flowers, pressing table linens, polishing silver, and cleaning glassware to a “sparkling” finish. When Christmas Day, the denouement of seasonal hustle, arrives, Santa flippantly reminds homemakers to, “Remember to relax.” This is an easy and wholly appropriate statement coming from

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163 Seagram Distillers Corporation, “At Long Last, We Can Sing Again” advertisement, Life, December 24, 1945, 30.
165 Helen F. Krouse, “Christmas Notes to Yourself,” Good Housekeeping, December 1945, 98.
Santa Claus; this mythical man’s esteemed position in the hearts and minds of Christmas celebrants, particularly children, is built upon the very real and sometimes thankless labor of loving mothers.

In 1949, *Good Houskeeping’s* Janet Graham offered a different, more sympathetic perspective on women’s holiday household labor, this time in the form of a humorous song and illustration. A neatly dressed mother fastens a bristly full evergreen swag to the wall while gazing dejectedly at the floor beneath her where her “helpful” children have strewn broken ornaments and blown fuses. “Wreck the halls! Rip out the wiring,” begins the song, “‘Tis the season I find tiring.” Seasonal fatigue, far from being a new phenomena, was present in turn-of-the-century America as well.166 *Ladies’ Home Journal* of 1897 featured an article written by a man expressing how “‘truly thankful’” men across America will be when the “‘Christmas business’” is over, despite the fact that the season’s end is invariably punctuated by “‘seeing their wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters reach Christmas day utterly tired out, [and] with the prospect of a siege of illness as soon as Christmas is over.’”167

On the whole, however, homemaking magazines downplayed the effort required to stage a perfect holiday. Tutorials for Christmas decorations included no step-by-step images, and precious few instructional words, to guide women through the construction of centerpieces, wreaths, and tabletop vignettes; these arrangements simply *happened*. Espaliered evergreen trees naturally grew from dining tables, and angelic chorus alighted

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166 Restad, *Christmas in America*, 64.
on mantles as facilely as the falling snow. All such Christmas decorations are “simple,” “easy,” completed “with the least effort.” If Christmas celebration required only that homemakers “deck the halls,” then perhaps the season would pass with minimal sweat and toil. However, decoration was but one facet of holiday preparation. Magazines directed homemakers to bake cookies, make candies, shop mindfully (and early, in the case of those monogrammed gifts and fruit boxes), entertain guests, wrap gifts with flair, host open houses, and prepare dazzling meals. Each of these tasks was in and of itself deceptively complex and prone to complication, and this could cause a homemaker’s holiday to-do to grow exponentially. Beyond minute instructions, Christmas tutorials of the postwar period are missing something else: guidance on the care and keeping of the psychic needs of the family at Christmastime.

But in truth, that guidance was present, encoded in the Christmas holiday itself. American Christmas matured over the course of the nineteenth century, morphing and melding to meet the needs of its celebrants, all the while acquiring meanings that, by and large, survived to serve mid-twentieth century celebrants as well. As historian Karal Ann Marling puts it, “the manger,” or the holiday’s foundational religious narrative, “has never been a mainstay of the American Christmas.” Christmas is sustained not by love for the Christ child, but by Americans’ desire to connect to their imagined past, foster community, and delight their children. Christmas met these same needs for Americans in

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1850, the year *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the era’s arbiter of middle class style, published a Christmastime picture of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert later credited with popularizing the Christmas tree in America.\(^{171}\) The American Christmas of 1950, from which the tree was now inseparable, fulfilled these same roles, though its reason for doing so had shifted with the times. As Historian Penne Restad argues, nineteenth century Americans saw in Christmas a safe haven from Civil War and its precipitate issues: “absence, discord, misunderstanding, forgiveness, and regeneration.” In celebrating the quiet, domestic holiday Northerners and Southerners alike reclaimed the peace that alluded them in adulthood but, from their war-weary perspective, seemed so abundant in childhood. Christmas, “baptized in blood,” was declared a national holiday in 1870.\(^{172}\)

Americans grappling with the aftermath of World War II were similarly eager to reclaim some semblance, imagined or not, of pre-war peace and domestic order. Their need was pressing, for though armed conflict had ceased, tranquility in the ensuring years was nothing if not uncertain. America was prospering economically, but would depression once again come knocking? Soldiers were returning from the battlefront, but what prospects awaited them? International foes had been vanquished, but what new ones would arise?\(^{173}\) What uncertainties awaited the youth of the nation? Being a popular time for travel, Christmas occasioned a physical return home for celebrants, and the ritualistic


observances that unfolded within the homeplace, surrounded in an aura of timelessness (and some are, indeed, quite old), heightened the experience of Christmas as a “time out of time.” Christmas was no mere point on a linear timeline, but an eternal plane accessible through sacred customs.\textsuperscript{174} Customs officiated by women.

It was women, the people charged with the execution of domestic labor, who carried modern Christmas from its antebellum advent to its midcentury apotheosis. The superficial Christmas landscape of trees, wreaths, sweets, and songs created by women was a portal through which all celebrants could access the nurturing, protective power of tradition, goodwill, and childish fantasy. \textit{Good Housekeeping} and other popular homemaking magazines of the post-World War II attempted to tap into the longstanding psychic desires of American families by persuading their female gatekeepers that their publication’s particular brand of Christmas offered the surest route to its most fulfilling observance.

Fathers, husbands, and sons, on the other hand, were warned by homemaking magazines to stand clear of most Christmas preparations. In these scenarios, men were depicted as either hapless, helpless (albeit enthusiastic) bunglers of simple chores or as disinterested, somewhat sarcastic observers.\textsuperscript{175} In one such instance, \textit{Good Housekeeping}’s Kay Riley teamed up with illustrator Lauren Cook to provide a full-page showcase of the various ways in which teenage boys are prone to botch Christmas celebration. One boy dishonors the Christmas commandment of peace and goodwill by quarreling with a rival over a young woman’s attention at party. “Christmas comes but

\textsuperscript{174} Gillis, \textit{A World of Their Own Making}, 102.
\textsuperscript{175} “Merry Christmas,” \textit{Better Homes & Gardens}, December 1948, 10-11.
once a year,” Riley narrates, “skip the battles while it’s here.” Another boy, “Helpless Harry,” attempts to decorate a Christmas tree but succeeds only in toppling it.\(^{176}\) Apparently old habits die hard, for Old Gold Cigarettes ran an advertisement in 1945 featuring another hapless man entwined in a fallen Christmas tree. His wife looks on patronizingly while offering an Old Gold to calm his frayed nerves.\(^{177}\) Tensions between husband and wife ran high in a series of Scotch Tape ads from the Christmas seasons of 1947 and 1948. Adopting a how-to format, this series illustrated the many ways Scotch Tape could be employed at Christmas time. Seal packages, embellish greeting cards, hang ornaments—do it all with Scotch Tape, now in festive Christmas colors. The helpful and seemingly effortless decorative hints, completed by a woman’s red polished fingertips, are paired with single-panel comics depicting husbands who, in contrast, struggled bitterly to complete Christmas shopping, one of the few Christmas chores men were expected to complete unassisted. A panel found in *Ladies’ Home Journal* of 1948 depicts a man buckling under the weight of oversized Christmas packages, while the Scotch husband of 1947 shops for doghouses “for man or beast” and, at a reduced price, “mismatched love birds.” “Give your wife the bird,” reads the shop sign.\(^{178}\)

From such comic scenarios, it would seem that all of Christmas affronted to masculine sensibilities but, as Karal Marling observes, there are some seasonal tasks deemed appropriate for husbands and sons, namely acquiring and installing the Christmas tree. “Jobs involving heavy lifting,” like felling or hauling a tree, “have been seen as


\(^{177}\) Old Gold Cigarettes, “Why Be Irritated” advertisement, *Life*, December 24, 1945, 64.

Women’s homemaking magazines, whose vitality hinged on directing women in household care, clearly evinced this uneven division of Christmas labor. The father of Good Housekeeping contributor Katherine Fite enthusiastically pursued the perfect Christmas tree (with near disastrous results), but for the remainder of the holiday season was humbled by his ineptitude and left “kneeling at the shrine of feminine wisdom.”

The sixth item on Helen Krouse’s friendly “to-do” advises readers to select a tree whose dimensions fit those of their existing tree stand “so it won’t take two men and a boy to put up the tree.” This scene was illustrated in a Better Homes feature of 1948 wherein a pipe-smoking father is depicted inspecting a wild growing evergreen while his son and daughter gather loose boughs. Mother is totally absent from this outing (figure 4). Though these magazines were bursting with advice on how best to decorate the tree, there are no comparable features on how to select said tree from the countless others found in urban tree lots, much less in the wintry forest. When not hauling the Christmas tree from the dealer, or gifts from the store, men are depicted as wiling away yuletide evenings in the living room, ensconced in the Christmas landscape of their wives’ making.

179 Karal Ann Marling, Merry Christmas: Celebrating America’s Greatest Holiday (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 72-73. Marling argues that tasks involving electric lights, such as stringing them on trees or adorning the home’s exterior, were also reserved for men. While the image of men stringing lights conforms to stereotypical images of Christmas, the homemaking magazines of the late 1940s do not corroborate her observation. Numerous decor articles aimed at women incorporate electric lights without referencing a need for male help.

180 Katherine Fite, “Rest Ye Merrie, Gentlemen,” Good Housekeeping, December 1946, 43, 220.


182 Helen Breeder Cross, “Have You Any Traditions At Your House,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1948, 27.
As vividly depicted in the pages of *Good Housekeeping, Ladies’ Home Journal*, and *Better Homes and Gardens* the domestic Christmas landscape began at the front door, where family and friends alike were greeted by festive arrangements of greenery, ribbons, and playfully placed toys. Some households operating ahead of the curve treated their lawn as an extension of the Christmas canvas. Exterior illumination and figural displays, like those seen on Sacramento’s La Purrissima Way, or “Santa Street,” grew in popularity in the latter half of the 1940s with the end of wartime material rationing and, just as crucial, of wartime dim-out regulations, but the art form truly hit its stride in the 1950s.\(^{183}\) For the remainder of the 1940s, however, the front door was the portal to

domestic winter wonderlands where evergreen garlands, suggestive of the natural
landscape, encircled doorways, wound around bannisters, and crept across tabletops.
Gaps in the greenery were filled with figurines of Santa Claus, choral singers, angels,
Wise Men, and snowmen. Every holly leaf, silvered ball, and ceramic cherub marched
toward the Christmas tree, the “center of life and gaiety” in the Christmas home.184 Live
trees reigned supreme at this time, and homemakers were instructed to decorate them in
unified schemes: all ball ornaments, all stars, all red, all composed as a feast for the eyes.

Just as important as the lush decor were the actual feasts of roast meat, vegetables,
salads (often jellied in classic midcentury style), cookies, candies, and pastries that
plastered the dining tables of homemaking magazines. The holiday meals featured in
these publications were unfailingly bounteous and attractively served. The placement of
maraschino cherries and shredded coconut received as much attention as Christmas
ornaments and centerpieces. When describing their culinary creations, writers turned to
words like “glamorous,” “festive,” and “dazzling,” as often as the expected superlatives
of “delicious” and “tasty.”185 In some instances, writers recommended using particularly

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184 Anne Beasley Wertsner, Make Your Own Merry Christmas (New York: M. Barrows and Company,
185 The perceived “glamour” and visual appeal of foods are mentioned in the following sources: “Betty
Crocker Ginger Cake Mix: Here’s Betty Crocker’s New ‘Cake in a Box’” advertisement, Ladies’ Home
Coconut” advertisement, Good Housekeeping, December 1949, 162. Fae Huttenlocher, “Food With
Holiday Glamour,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1946, 52-53. “Whe-ee-e! There’s Coconut This
Piece,” Ladies’ Home Journal, December 1947, 108-109. The following magazine sources mentioned taste
while describing their foods: Frances O’Connor, “When Holiday Company Comes,” Better Homes &
Gardens, December 1950, 70-71. “10 Christmas Sweets Easy on Sugar,” Better Homes and Gardens,
December 1945, 42-43. Fae Rowley, “Be Festive With Fruit,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1945,
Medal Enriched Flour: Double-Quick Cookies Are Happy Holiday News” advertisement, Ladies’ Home
attractive food items, namely cookies, as Christmas tree ornaments.\textsuperscript{186} The Christmas holiday itself accounts for the profusion and “glamour” of the featured foods. These are recipes intended for consumption at specially planned and well-attended holiday parties and family gatherings. Hostesses required a large and accommodating variety of foods to feed large crowds of people, and the appearance of the spread was a complement to and extension of the broader interior Christmas landscape. Just like the tree itself, the food helped to distinguish Christmas as special occasion, separated from the workaday world by uncommon sensual pleasures.

Christmas of the latter 1940s must not be misconstrued as a purely hedonistic affair dedicated wholly to sumptuous foods and dazzling sights. That is a description befitting the holiday’s pre-Christian incarnations, but for the midcentury Americans in question, the spectacle of Christmas was a means to an end. Certain decor items symbolized religious figures and events foundational to the Christmas myth; other items elicited nostalgia from adults and wonder from children, ensuring that both groups establish a visceral connection with the holiday’s sights. Similarly, special Christmas meals and sweet treats had the potential to evoke nostalgia and wonder in adults and children, and for holiday guests food was a manifestation of a kind of hospitality peculiar to the holiday. Glazed hams for dinner with take-home tins of cookies; this was “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men.” At this time, that Christmas commandment carried special meaning for those who heard it. Peace and goodwill: these were absent on the global

stage, but perhaps they could be nourished at home and, from there, carried elsewhere at Christmas time.187 This was an uncertain prospect, but Christmas offered alternate routes to personal contentment, namely the use of “traditional” decor and food items. Christmas, like many holidays, is inherently retrospective; its celebration is structured around the reenactment of customs inherited from parents, grandparents and, beyond that, the immemorial past. Therefore Christmas was a yearly revival of the past, which, relative to the Cold War present, held immense appeal. Christmas is nominally religious and, therefore, its celebrants may have feigned apoliticism but, as Karal Marling explains, “because [Christmas] is about memory and yesterdays— personal identity at its very point or origin— Christmas speaks to the national identity, too… Christmas speaks to dreams that come true, to comfort, generosity, and the sheltering warmth of home— to the elusive American dream.”188 It follows that if the warmth and promise of Christmas is shared with guests in the form of hospitality, or with children through its wondrous sights, stories, and indulgences, then they too may partake of some peace in a deceptively treacherous world.

In their own time, Christmas decorations and other preparations such as shopping, gift wrapping, and entertaining enjoyed a mixed reception— sometimes from the same person. The holiday was derided as over-commercialized and overwrought as well as physically, emotionally, and financially draining. Yet often these criticisms were quickly tempered by exhortations of Christmas’s positive aspects. “Christmas happiness does not depend on price tags,” Catherine Mackenzie wrote for the New York Times, “so much as

187 Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 16-18. May posits a model of the Cold War era home in which domestic order and security was cultivated and used to counteract geopolitical and social insecurity.
188 Marling, Merry Christmas, 354-355.
on the mood and on the things the family enjoy together.” Among Mackenzie’s “things” was a do-it-yourself wreath, marshmallow snowman, and a Santa made from apples, all projects designed to be accessible and appealing to children, Christmas’s target audience.\footnote{Catherine Mackenzie, “Parent and Child: Christmas Happiness,” \textit{New York Times}, December 22, 1946, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, http://search.proquest.com/news/docview/107582896/2F016D851C79416CPQ/5?accountid=11667.} Homemaking magazines operated under the assumption that their readership was likewise concerned with accommodating children at Christmastime, and their decorating recommendations often catered to the youngest set. \textit{Good Housekeeping} of December 1948 featured a towering Christmas centerpiece, the base layer of which was encircled by gingerbread men cookies fit for a “children’s party table.”\footnote{Helen Sells, “The Studio: Center of Attraction,” \textit{Good Housekeeping}, December 1948, 78-79.} Next Christmas, \textit{Better Homes} also praised Christmas cookies, this time highlighting the baking process itself as attractive to curious and peckish children. Baking cookies transforms one’s kitchen into an “exciting” destination for “neighborhood youngsters.”\footnote{“Christmas Cookies,” \textit{Better Homes and Gardens}, December 1949, 67-68.} \textit{Good Housekeeping}’s Christmas centerpiece of 1946 was also designed to delight children, however then it was composed of a child’s sled and numerous small wrapped gifts, some of which were tucked under the arms of miniature plush snowmen. With this arrangement at hand, Christmas dinner may conclude with “Dad, officiating as Santa Claus” distributing the gifts.\footnote{“Ideas You Can Use for Your Christmas Table,” \textit{Good Housekeeping}, December 1946, 72-73.}

Dad, or Santa Claus, may have assumed that position of glory, but it was against mother’s backdrop of fanciful decor and food meant to delight children. Turning once again to \textit{Better Homes} editor Frank McDonough and his 1945 salutation to post-war Christmas, “Exit Christmas False-Face,” the integral role of children at Christmas
becomes clear. It is not only that these youngsters enjoyed Christmas more—though that is no small part of their role—but they also allowed adults to delight in the holiday in a new way. During the war, McDonough writes, Christmas joy resided only in the hearts of children for they, “knowing nothing of the world, kept alive the true spirit of Christmas.” The world had become so inhospitable to the Christmas spirit that its only refuge existed in minds of those too young to grasp its geopolitical and social realities. All the better for weary adults who could live vicariously through their innocent children. As McDonough writes, it was “thru [children], at last, our faith and courage were renewed.” In an effort to preserve the innocence of their children, and their own faith in a peaceful future, homemakers transformed their homes at Christmastime into wonderlands replete with tabletop sleds, gift-bearing snowmen, and delightfully decorated Christmas cookies. This was a place where childish imagination, hope, and fancy could run wild, for a time.

As Frank McDonough indicated, parents enjoyed Christmas vicariously through their children, but some Christmas spectacles spoke directly to adult audiences or, to use his words, to those who knew too much of the world. For Christmas decor of the 1950s, novelty was the name of the game. Artificial trees in outlandish colors that “barely alluded to the anatomy of the genuine article” sprouted in American living rooms, blow-mold Nativity scenes and Santa Clauses made camp on lawns, and decorators welcomed a “color explosion” that came to emblematize their nation’s prosperity and freedom of consumer choice. For the remainder of the 1940s, however, time-tested accents dominated decorative schemes. Horticulturalist Anne Wertsner explained in her 1946

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193 Frank W. McDonough, “Across the Editor’s Desk: Exit Christmas False-Face,” Better Homes and Gardens, December 1945, 11
194 Marling, Merry Christmas, 60.
decorative treatise *Make Your Own Merry Christmas* that, “Artificial Christmas trees cannot compare with real trees in dignity or significance.” If artificial trees are to be employed at all, she suggests that, “They should be regarded as interesting fancies, or as decorative details in a complete Christmas picture.”

For an authentic holiday, it had to be the real thing, because the utilization of traditional decorations completed a bridge to Christmases past and to their nostalgic appeal. Old-fashioned decor brought with it an old fashioned Christmas untouched by modern societal woes. This line of thinking applied to more than Christmas decorations; it characterized domestic architectural trends of the postwar period. In its monthly “Building Forum” *Good Housekeeping* of 1945 argued that, “In the reaction to wartime conditions, home buyers are seeking security, familiarity, and ‘homeyness,’” all traits impossible to cultivate in a modern and “severe ‘machine for living,’” home.

Homes were expected to meet physical as well as psychic needs of adults, and the decor within was no exception.

In 1948, *Good Housekeeping*, which had disparaged modern “machines for living” three years before, stumped for traditional design in the Christmas living room. Helen Sells, the magazine’s decor guru, urged homemakers to revive old-fashioned decorations, citing them as artifacts of a bygone and better Christmas. In her holiday feature, “Sing a Song of Christmas,” Sells suggests readers use decorations to, “tell a story of Christmas, old-fashioned Christmas around your hearth.” “Bring out the long-ago ornaments to trim a traditional tree,” which included cones (which could hold candy and small gifts), pompoms, and lanterns fashioned from paper. With this decorative

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scheme, devoid of colorful glass ornaments, Sells recreated an antebellum era Christmas tree, complemented by her unadorned wallhangings of boxwood and pine. Nearby, a pajama-clad mother and children sing “the ageless carols” at a black baby grand piano lit by two silver candelabras. This was not a midcentury Christmas scene; it was a time machine, capable of transporting viewers back to an imagined past where wholesomeness, homeyness, and handicraft prevailed. This was a Christmas, Sells wrote, “With true sentiment,” with the power to “warm the hearts of everyone who comes to your door.”

No *Good Housekeeping* reader of 1948 remembered antebellum American Christmas, nor the first Christmas of Biblical lore. Yet surrounded by artifacts and tokens of these bygone eras, adult celebrants experienced a “utopian nostalgia” for these imagined golden ages, time from which only positive and flattering traits radiated. Antebellum Christmas landscapes signaled social stability and prosperity, just as “olde” medieval Christmases spoke to Victorian Londoners of rural idyll and lordly benefaction. Figures and symbols culled from the Bible served as ready illustrations Christmas’s founding story but, more than that, they were symbolic of a purer, unadulterated form of faith, present before the corrupting forces of ecclesiastical institutions and, what was especially important to modern adherents, before commercial cooption (the irony of the store-bought nativity set never came up). *Good Housekeeping* suggested statuettes of Madonna and Joan of Arc for “hints of Christmas holiness,” and

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Better Homes, perhaps in a fit of postwar thanksgiving, devoted an entire article to Madonna-centric Christmas arrangements. A Madonna and Child on the mantel would “bring a feeling of spiritual peace” and remind the family “that the real purpose of Christmas is to commemorate the birth of a child who brought new hope and faith to the world.” Utopian nostalgia was joined by nostalgia of a more familiar sort, namely nostalgia felt for childhood. To honor that imagined golden age of peace and contentedness, Fae Rowley of Better Homes suggested a menu composed primarily of foods chosen for their nostalgic appeal. Rowley, with another oblique reference to the newfound peace, explained that, “For this glad Christmas we’re planning again the same fine American holiday dinner we gloried in as children,” featuring turkey with “Mom’s” dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy from “Dad’s” spoon, and “Grandma’s” famed creamed onion recipe.

Magazines prescribed Christmas preparations using traditional decor items and recipes in part because Christmas, like all holidays, subsisted on inherited customs, and in part to connect and communicate with the people with whom they shared the holidays. On the pages of women’s magazines, children delighted in Christmas’ fanciful decor and sweet treats; meanwhile adults were served up a slice of their own childhoods or of some other distant, more serene age. The idealized Christmas at midcentury often entailed a busy schedule of entertaining and social circulation as well, meaning that the “symbolic vocabulary” of Christmas decorations and edibles spoke to those far beyond one’s nuclear family. “Holiday season is open season for ‘having people in,’”” writes Good

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Housekeeping. What such magazines make abundantly clear is that Christmas visitors, be they out-of-town relatives or dinner party guests, were to be afforded special treatment. Sitting down with a cup of coffee to converse with your guests would be acceptable only if it followed a satisfactorily impressive multi-course meal, like the one Fae Rowley described. But more often food writers prided themselves on providing visually dazzling and innovative meal plans for Christmas festivities. Better Homes of 1947 profiled glamour desserts and salads, dishes whose great variety of colorful ingredients welcomed artistic flourishes. “Every chance you get during the holiday,” though, if these magazines holiday tips are to be faithfully followed, such “chances” were few and far between, “make the food you serve look Christmasy with a sprig of holly, or a twig of evergreen, a red candle, or a big red cherry.” With three out of these four recommended garnishes being, in fact, inedible or poisonous, ornament clearly rivaled taste in importance. Hence the heavy use of visual descriptors—“glamorous,” “dazzling,” and “festive”—in period food advertisements and recipes. Just like the plush snowmen and gift-bedecked sleds joining them on the dining room table, these dishes were used by homemakers to speak to their guests. By lavishing diners with uncommon foods, carefully decorated and expertly staged, homemakers communicated the Christmas spirit of goodwill and hospitality. Just as Better Homes wrote about Christmas cookies, they are “gifts that say I-thought-of-you.”

The idea that homemakers spoke lovingly through their Christmas menu offerings originates not in the Christmas historiography; it is plainly stated by the sources

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themselves. Myrna Johnson who, in 1949, planned a “Jingle Bells Buffet” for Better Homes readers, emphasized the central importance of guest perception of Christmas foods by offering readers a “guest’s-eye view” of the dinner table. If her food and styling recommendations are followed, then guests will perceive that:

Loving hands shaped the snowballs, trimmed them with holly, touched match to red candles, knew well the big-eyed reception they could get from the youngsters. There’s the spirit of Christmas about this buffet array. And that’s as it should be. Mix fun with good food, and your guests can feel the warmth of your welcome… This dinner’s planned so you can get a lot of the preparation out of the way well ahead. That gives you plenty of time to make sure everything looks extra beautiful at serving time.²⁰⁵

With such a congested schedule of Christmas entertaining, there was more work to be done, more opportunities to refine one’s vocabulary. Frances Connor of Better Homes provided menu suggestions for four different types of Christmas gatherings: a tree trimming party, a Christmas afternoon luncheon, a Christmas Eve reception, and an open house. Each event’s menu is unique, and all together they contain thirty-eight distinct menu items or recipes.²⁰⁶ Given due attention, some dishes went beyond generic messages of hospitality to target certain diners personally. Cookies and candies could treat youngsters, and in perhaps the most unusual menu offering of the decade, Fae Huttenlocher provided a ham recipe designed to, “Give Father the yuletide thrill of an English lord!” She accomplished this feat of time travel by strategically slicing and decorating a ham to resemble the severed head of roasted pig. The first step in this somewhat gruesome, and surely laborious, process entails having “your butcher saw the shank bone deep enough to make the mouth,” then taking the ham home where you may

cut ears from the rind, affix raisins for eyes, and “press a bright red apple into its mouth.” The result is striking, to say the least (figure 5).

The amount of housework assigned to women in the name of Christmas could be staggering. If the advice of Helen Krouse’s friendly reminder Santa is to be followed, Christmas preparation begins one month before the holiday. If Anne Beasley Wertsner had her way, Christmas preparation would be a yearlong affair. “A good time to look forward to Christmas is when you have just finished enjoying one. Then you may be full of ideas for next year,” and flush with the time and attention needed to collect useful and unusual materials for decorations. Thereafter, Christmas housework entailed planning

gifts (not to mention actually *shopping* for them, a task with which men struggled famously); ordering flowers; polishing and cleaning dinner ware; laundering and pressing linens; building evergreen hangings; constructing centerpieces; planning and preparing multi-course meals; baking cookies and packaging some for dispatch to the homes of loved ones and social acquaintances alike. “‘Tis the season I find tiring,” goes the comic refrain from *Good Housekeeping* of 1949. No such schedule of toil and trouble could subsist unless its keepers benefited from its enactment, or perhaps risked something precious in failing it. The aforementioned labor was completed with an eye toward meeting the three uses of Christmas: connecting with the past, indulging children, and spreading goodwill. The precise significance—literally, what each signified—shifted with the times. By 1945, the past, be it the distant utopian past of Bethlehem or that of childhood, offered a comforting alternative reality to the present, now menaced by atomic power. 209 Horrified by the atom as well as the destruction and deprivation visited upon Europe’s children, American Christmas celebrants felt a renewed urgency in treating their own children to holiday delights and nurturing their sweetest tendencies. And among their many holiday guests, homemakers wished to foster goodwill for it had been, and continued to be, so glaringly lacking. The stuff of Christmas should not be discounted as frivolities, nor should the work which produces it be disparaged as consumerist droning.

Shortchanging Christmas and its requisite labor would, however, be in keeping with an unfortunate tradition of belittling women’s work. Despite what Scotch Tape

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advertisements indicated, men were not spared from Christmas labor (tree retrieval excepted) merely because they were flustered by it.\textsuperscript{210} Women control Christmas because virtually all of the labor required to enact its rituals fall under the category of housework, the traditional labor assignment of American women and, as of 1945, still overwhelmingly their responsibility.\textsuperscript{211} Christmas, in a way, was a seasonal bout of extreme homemaking, during which the usual tasks of cooking, cleaning, decorating, childrearing, and entertaining took place on a larger scale and with greater significance attached to them.\textsuperscript{212} With this in mind, it is worthwhile to consider not just the physical work but also the psychosocial work completed by women at Christmas. One such facet of Christmas work, what Carolyn J. Rosenthal terms “kinkeeping,” involved the maintenance of contact and congenial relationships between family members. As of 1985, there was a kinkeeper in virtually every extended family, Rosenthal found, and they were invariably female. Moreover, the responsibilities of kinkeeping were often passed down through generations via mother-daughter relationships. Individual kinkeepers cited their desire to “keep the family together” against the rending tides of death, migration, and a general sense of drifting apart.

At no point have families been spared the destructive effects of death, migration, and distance, but one respondent to Rosenthal’s inquiries cited World War II as an

\textsuperscript{210} The collected sociological research into Christmas shopping, however, does indicate that men often do feel flustered at Christmas, see: Stephen J. Arnold and Eileen Fischer, “More Than a Labor of Love: Gender Roles and Christmas Gift Shopping,” \textit{Journal of Consumer Research} 17, no. 3 (December 1990), 333-345.


especially vulnerable time: “‘During the war we were all in the services and got
separated, all going our own way. Later some of us came to Canada. She [the kinkeeper]
wanted to keep us closer together than we were, so she started writing us all about new of
each other.’”213 As shown by magazine features highlighting the triumphant return of
Father and Brother, the reestablishment and stabilization of family life was in the
forefront of many Americans’ minds. For the Christmas of 1945, Coca-Cola ran an
advertisement featuring a young soldier reclining by a decorated Christmas tree, lifting
his infant child into the air for the first time, and Better Homes’ Frank McDonough
mused about the “many thousands of children, some of them just becoming acquainted
with fathers… [who] will wake Daddy in the dark morning hours, eager to see what Santa
brought.”214 With its dedicated travel, conviviality, gift-giving, and general goodwill,
popular culture defined Christmas as a finely honed tool of kinkeeping.

Seeing to the proper observance of Christmas, as well as Thanksgiving, Easter,
and many other holidays, is another responsibility not always included in the lists of
traditional “women’s work.” If a holiday is celebrated primarily within the home then,
like Christmas, its successful execution likely relied upon the heavily orchestrated labor
of a woman. In this capacity, women are kinkeepers as well as keepers of tradition.
Without their guiding hand at times of celebration, customs would fall by the wayside, if
not disappear entirely, and younger generations could neither observe the day’s physical
trappings nor imbibe their symbolic importance. Without the Santa Claus charade, there

213 Carolyn J. Rosenthal, “Kinkeeping in the Familial Division of Labor,” Journal of Marriage and Family
47, no. 4 (November, 1985), 965-974.
214 Coca-Cola, “Christmas Together… Have a Coke” (advertisement), Ladies’ Home Journal, December
1945, 97. Frank W. McDonough, “Across the Editor’s Desk: Exit Christmas False-Face,” Better Homes
and Gardens, December 1945, 11.
is no childish wonder; without the decorated evergreen, no appeal to tradition, no nostalgic glow. Though the precise form of “Christmas” varied from household to household, there still existed a discernible pattern of observance between families.

Christmas, for example, invariably involved evergreen decorations, gift giving, and references—explicitly as in the recitation of Biblical scripture or implicit as with figural arrangements—to the Nativity. Taken together with communal activities such as shopping and Christmas light viewing, domestic Christmases formed a web of broader, community-wide recommitment to shared beliefs.

Despite homemaking magazines’ implicit claims otherwise, Christmas was not effortless. The holiday did not, nor had it ever, simply arrived upon the hearts and hearths of its celebrants. It came with baggage, and women unpacked it. For a picture perfect holiday, there were wreaths to make and trees to decorate; cookies to bake, and feasts to serve; tables to set, and guests to entertain. These tasks could help to fulfill Christmas’s full post-war utility. Christmas was far from meaningless, and women who labored to make it happen did not do so in vain. What this also means is that Christmas acted as a theatrically scaled reinforcement of patriarchal values and restrictive gender norms. The ideal Christmas depicted women reigning over their private, domestic sphere, busying herself with the maintenance of the home and the people within it. Men, meanwhile, continued unabated in their ignorance of household operation and childcare and in their

215 Pleck, Celebrating the Family, 16.
216 Amitai Etzioni, “Holidays and Rituals,” in We Are What We Celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals by Amitai Etzioni and Jared Bloom, eds. (New York City: New York University Press, 2004), 10-11. Etzioni posits a model for classifying holidays into either “recommitment holidays” such as Christmas or “tension management holidays” such as Halloween. The former serve to reaffirm community values while the latter invites subversion of those values.
derision of sentimentality.217 In magazine depictions, women waited on men, feeding them and seeing to their physical as well as emotional comfort and, in exchange, men felled the Christmas tree and the grandfatherly Santa Claus claimed top billing each Christmas morning. In countless homes across the country, Christmas surely fell short of this ideal, and the continual, fruitless striving could leave women feeling dissatisfied or disappointing.218

But Christmas has survived. Since its eighteenth century domestic rebirth it has persisted as the premier home holiday. Those who bemoan its death to modern commercialization are at best deluded, at worst disingenuous, for the holiday has always been about *stuff*. And that all-important stuff was always born from the hands of the kinkeepers, culture-keepers, the women of the family. The result of their labor may not have met the impossibly high standards of *Better Homes and Gardens* or *Good Housekeeping*, but Christmas’s annual revival by seasoned homemakers and young nesters, male and female, speaks to its success in touching something soft, and still striving, within its celebrants. Maybe, someday, as W.H. Auden wrote during World War II, they will finally get it right:

> Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -- Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, And the children got ready for school. There are enough Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -- Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot, Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully -- To love all of our relatives, and in general Grossly overestimated our powers.219

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217 Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 16, 128-130.
218 Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making*, 178.
Epilogue

Writing for the National Review in 2013, Jim Geraghty made an observation about Christmas that many celebrants would likely agree with. Christmas, he wrote, is a time when the popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s suddenly returned to the present, and it did so “with a vengeance.” Coffee shops, department stores, homes: none were impervious to the midcentury renaissance occasioned by Christmas. Radio stations that typically played contemporary hits reverted back to wartime Christmas standards, while television channels shuffle through midcentury Christmas classics like It’s a Wonderful Life, Miracle of 34th Street, and the Bing Crosby hit White Christmas. In search of an explanation, Geraghty references the popular online comic strip XKCD whose creator, Randall Munroe, points a finger at baby boomer cultural hegemony.220 “Every year American culture embarks on a massive project to carefully recreate the Christmases of baby boomers’ childhoods,” explains the comic, using a bar chart to illustrate the domination of radio airwaves by Christmas songs penned in the 1940s and 1950s: “Winter Wonderland,” “Little Drummer Boy” and, again, “White Christmas.”221 This is a temptingly straightforward explanation for Christmas’s midcentury flavor, to chalk it up as a mere side effect of demographic realities. Perhaps there is some truth in this assessment, but as the Boomers age and are surpassed—numerically and


Geraghty himself posits a provisional explanation for the peculiar seasonal fugue: the Christmas songs of World War II and the postwar era were simply \textit{better}. They were better at capturing the pure, timeless spirit of the Christmas season, and as a result they remain as appealing to modern ears as they were to those who first heard them. Songwriters of this era, he continued, had World War II to thank for their preternatural access to the Christmas spirit. “Nothing like a national near-death experience,” he argues, “to make you appreciate everything you have, and how lucky you are if you have your friends and family with you.”\footnote{223}{Jim Geraghty, “Christmas Season: When the 1940s and 1950s Suddenly Return With a Vengeance.”}

Another tempting line of reasoning. The Christmas spirit, “peace on Earth, goodwill to men,” could find no better foil than that of an unprecedentedly destructive global war. Be they veterans of the “Good War” or their parents, wives, siblings and neighbors, Americans had danced perilously close with death and, as popular Christmas music of the era suggests, wished nothing more than to return to their families, to their homes and the loving nurturance that lay within. “I’ll be home for Christmas,” went the refrain, “if only in my dreams.”

The mid-twentieth century produced Christmas icons beyond classic songs. This was the era of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (the eponymous book, song, \textit{and} movie), of Frosty the Snowman, NORAD’s Santa Tracker, and Dr. Seuss’s \textit{How the Grinch Stole Christmas}, all of which were perfectly poised to entrance the ever-growing population of American youths, those “baby boomers” whom internet pundits blame for hijacking the
Christmas airwaves. If demography alone explained the preponderance of midcentury Christmas pop culture, then Christmas creations of the much-talked-about millennial generation should dominate the airwaves by now. Yet from the 1980s and 1990s, few Christmas songs have emerged as enduring (if perplexing) hits: Wham’s “Last Christmas,” and Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” Both of which are love stories which, by happenstance almost, unfold during the holiday season. Hardly a showing to rival Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Nat “King” Cole, Burl Ives, Judy Garland—I could go on.

While the baby boomer demographic hypothesis may play a part in explaining the modern presence of midcentury Christmas icons, there are other forces afoot. Christmas is used today, just as it was by midcentury Americans, to connect with the past. By enacting seemingly ancient rituals and reviving timeless icons, celebrants summon the spirits of bygone times who shared reverence for them. These enlightened ancestors, who created a paradise in their own time, can surely guide modern celebrants to a correct Christmas observance. For midcentury Christmas celebrants, a generic “early American,” some genteel colonial or antebellum agrarian, was elevated as the enlightened one, and his perceived brand of Christmas, though it may be historically unsubstantiated, was favored as authentic. Jim Geraghty’s commentary indicates that the modern idea of the correct Christmas has shifted. Today, it does not exclude the “early American,” but it does include the midcentury American and, in particular, that magic American who inhabited a glorious time warmed by wartime triumph and prosperity, and not yet tainted by domestic social upheaval.
Far from being a new observation, modern worship of the 1940s and 1950s is familiar ground. As far as collective memory serves us, this was a time of financial prosperity, social stability, traditional family values, and American political ascendancy, a conception that overlooks the diversity of American life, downplays the role of government welfare programs, ignores the burgeoning Cold War and denies the fact that many of that era’s “traditional” characteristics were new, untenable developments. Likewise, the Christmas that existed during the postwar era was anxiety ridden and its jolly affects compensatory. Who is left to remember and recount the lurking doubts of postwar Christmas? Not the mothers who disguised them with ribbons and bows, but the children, now much older, who reveled blithely in her creation.

By the late 1960s, Christmas had jumped the shark. Harry Truman’s characterization of Christmas as the “great epic of family” lost ground, while critical commentary on the holiday’s commercialization found popular outlets in films like 1965’s *A Charlie Brown Christmas* whose lampooning of the aluminum Christmas tree, the blazing symbol of Christmas commercialization, is credited with felling that decorative trend. James Brown spoke for those Americans who never had the chance to enjoy the bountiful middle-class Christmas, never mind an aluminum Christmas tree. In 1968, Brown released a Christmas album featuring the track “Santa Claus Go Straight to the Ghetto.” In the ghetto, Santa will “see mothers/And soul brothers” who never had the chance to lavish their families with gifts from Saint Nick, so “Santa Claus, go straight to the ghetto.” Simon and Garfunkel appended a song to the end of their 1966 album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* that damned not just Christmas, but the entirety of a

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society that dared to celebrate “peace on earth” at that time. The song, entitled “7 O’Clock News/Silent Night,” features the duo softly singing “Silent Night” over the increasingly loud droning of a news anchorman reading recent headlines which included congressional stalemate over a civil rights bill, the death of Lenny Bruce, the murder of “nine student nurses” by Richard Speck, and the threat of “five more years of war” in Vietnam. By the song’s end, the words of “Silent Night” transform into a taunt.

Earlier Christmas songs of a more wholesome orientation continue to dominate the airwaves. Hallmark produces Christmas ornaments from midcentury icons like Gibson guitars, red and chrome record players, and the 1948 Ford F-1. Plush elves with cutesy faces reminiscent of 1950s Christmas card artwork infiltrate more homes every Christmas seasons under the vast “Elf on the Shelf” campaign. It is clear from these and other practices that modern Christmas clings to old symbols. One would be mistaken, however, to assume that Christmas means the same thing to celebrants today is it did to those even a generation ago. It remains to be seen how mounting concern over Christmas’s consumerist bent, the alleged secularization of America and, of course, the liberal “War on Christmas,” with its weaponized coffee cups, will alter modern Christmas customs and lay bare the insecurities, desires, and values of our time. Megachurch Pastor Rick Warren and others like him may insist that there is only one “reason for the season” and only one Christmas how-to text, the Bible itself, but it had never been so simple.
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