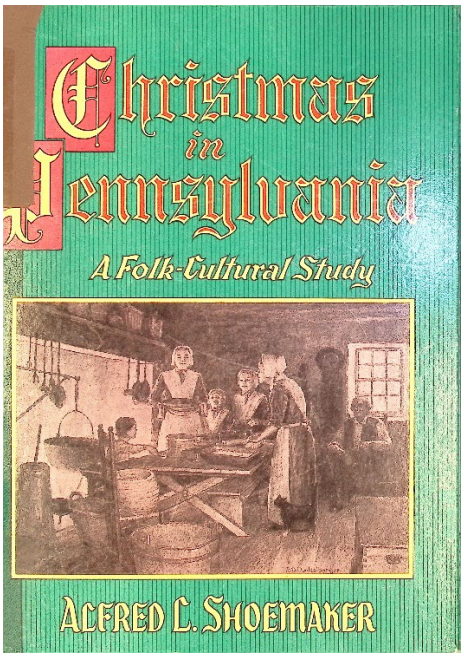
MARK ROOM PRESENTS…

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Christmas in Pennsylvania
A Folk-Cultural Study

By Alfred L Shoemaker



394.26 S559C - located in the Marx Room

Christmas in Pennsylvania A Folk-Cultural Study by Alfred L Shoemaker, at first appearance looks very dull and boring. To be completely honest, the moment I pulled it from the shelf I almost put it right back. But like the old adage, do not judge a book by its cover, this holds true of this particular book. After I opened up the book, I admit that it did not get better as at first glance it reads like a text book. My strong suggestion to the reader is **do not give up on this book** as it contains some very fascinating and interesting anecdotes about Christmas in the early years of Pennsylvania.

The book was published in 1959. It is 116 pages of how Christmas evolved in early Pennsylvania through the different cultures that lived here at that time – British Isles, Quaker, Scotch-Irish, and Pennsylvania Dutch. It is a book not meant to be read cover to cover but rather to look at the Table of Contents and the Index and immerse yourself in a topic from those sections that truly interests you. From there, you'll be surprised at what you find! I am going to give you the benefit of a few of my finds…

You will discover in the Introduction pages that in the early 18th and 19th centuries most Pennsylvanians did not even celebrate Christmas. However, it is also noted in many different subsections of the Introduction that there were Christmas-people and non-Christmas people and it all came down to your religious affiliation at the time.

I also discovered an interesting fact in another subsection of the Introduction titled, *"Christmas and the Legislature 1808-1814"* In the early parts of the 19th century, the Christmas controversy reached Harrisburg. On December 15, 1808, a debate in Harrisburg took place because it was found that no business could take place on the German second Christmas(December 26) since they treated it like a Sunday. It was remarked that since some of the Germans would not be present on that day that no business would be transacted in the House on that day. Once it was decided for the legislature to take an extended Christmas holiday, a news story was written in the predominately Quaker community of West Chester, keeping in mind this time period was around the War of 1812: "But perhaps the volunteers have only returned to keep Christmas in imitation of their brother soldiers in the legislature, who this season, it seems, have adjourned for two weeks, all but a day, (from Dec 23 to January 4). There is one trifling difference, in the two cases: The poor soldier gets only 30 cents a day, in the field, for having (in the language of the seat-of-government paper) 'bayonets poked through his ribs and his sides bored with bullets,' while his brother legislators draw three dollars a day for eating Christmas pies"(*American Republican*, West Chester, December 29, 1812.)

As we page into the book a little bit more, there is a section titled – Christmas Mummers. As many of us already know that at the start of the new year, the Philadelphia region has a Mummers Parade. But do any of us really know the background of the Mummers? Christmas Mummers were the counter part of the Belsnickel brought to Pennsylvania by settlers from German-speaking Europe. The mummers were groups of folk performers, each one impersonating a specific character and they would go from house to house on Christmas Eve. Their motive was to receive in turn for their performance a hand-out of something to eat or in lieu of food, a small coin. The Belsnickel went through neighborhoods solo supplied with cookies and nuts for good children and a whip to children who needed punishment for not obeying their parents.

No study of Christmas would be complete without a full section dedicated to Trimming the Christmas Tree. There is much controversy surrounding who had the first Christmas Tree in America let alone the first one in Pennsylvania – I have heard Bethlehem, I have heard Easton, but in this particular book, it states that the earliest Christmas tree in America for which there is an actual description is the Donegal Township, Lancaster County tree of 1822 or 1823. As published in the *Lancaster Intelligencer of December 24, 1881*, Simon Snyder Rathvon, a scientist, states the following: "Our Christmas tree on this occasion (In the early eighteen-twenties) may have been four feet high (about the height of a boy of ten years old) and every available branch contained an article of some kind," his description goes on in very vivid detail and is a feast for your senses to read his account. Not only will you find out about Pennsylvania's first Christmas tree but also about the earliest newspaper advertisements for Christmas tree ornaments that are stated to be in the *Easton Express in 1867*. Additionally, this section goes further in depth into all of the different types of ornaments used in the 19th century – everything from apples to egg-shells and beyond. The chapter ends with a very interesting part about different types of Humorous Christmas Trees in the 19th century.

From cookie baking to the naming of Kriss Kringle from Christ-kindel this book has it all about early Christmas in PA. The book is located for viewing in the Marx Room at the Easton Area Public Library. Come in and check it out this holiday season!