

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

The Spirit of Christmas: The YWCA, 1920–1930

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Here sits the original YWCA building at Third and Mulberry streets, which took over the Crawford Hotel in 1913. During Christmastime a century ago, the YWCA was a beacon of the season.

One of the most festive locations in Williamsport during the holidays was the YWCA at Third and Mulberry streets, where it was located before the YW on East Fourth Street was built. The organization had taken over the Crawford Hotel in 1913 and renovation work created a large gymnasium and parlors and turned the bar into a dining room. The YW scrapbooks from the 1920s are rich with newspaper articles that describe staff and

residents decorating the halls and parlors, hosting parties and giving back to the community.

The 1925 house director's report states that "*The spirit of Christmas was everywhere evident from the first to the last of the month.*" Those residents who remained for the actual day hung up their stockings in preparation for "*a most happy time.*" In 1929, there were only three women who stayed for the holiday, and they were treated to dinner at the Village Tea Room, located at 213 West Fourth St., a restaurant with a decor simulating a boulevard café.

Foreign children enjoy a party

Each year, the World Fellowship Committee of the YW gave a party for foreign children in the neighborhood. The gathering was announced in public school classrooms and often would be attended by more than 100 children, sometimes having to move its location to the First Presbyterian Church parlor across the street for more space. A Dorothy Deane newspaper column from December 21, 1928, reported that the party that year, held in the gymnasium, in which the "*little foreign children*" sang carols that they were taught in school, was a "*rare treat.*" There were dolls for the girls, toys for the boys and candy and an orange for all, and Mrs. Norma Lamade, dressed as Santa Claus, told them a Christmas story. An article in the Grit in September 1925 described the area around the YW as "*Little Italy,*" but emphasized that the children were also from families of Greeks, Russian Jews, Armenians and Syrians.

Festivities in "*full swing*"

Newspaper articles written about all the festivities at the YW used words like "*inspiring,*" "*loveliest,*" "*beautiful,*" "*delightful,*" "*in full swing.*" The season would usually begin with a procession of girls holding lighted candles walking through corridors and up and down staircases, singing carols and ending in the parlor listening to the Christmas story. In the evening there was the hanging of the greens and afterward a party with games and gifts.

YW staff members from different departments held a pageant each year. In 1927, Mrs. Alice Hicks directed "*The Spirit of Christmas*" with "*splendid*" costumes and "*parts memorized to perfection.*" The 1928 pageant was "*The Transfiguration of the Gifts,*" ending in the parlor with the Christmas story. Another year, Mrs. Harriet Nicely gave a talk entitled "*The Birth of Christmas in the Heart of the Individual.*" In 1929, Christmas vespers were held in the auditorium with a violin solo by Jack Aschinger, a cornet solo by Miss Eva Beck and a presentation by the YW Advanced Religious Drama class of a play written by Mary Russell titled "*A Christmas Problem.*"

Various clubs that met at the YW held Christmas functions throughout the month. The Williamsport Music Club hosted an "*Evening by the Fire*" with musical entertainment and the singing of carols; the Williamsport College Club sponsored a tea with each member bringing an undergraduate female student as a guest. In 1930, the Business and Professional Women made merry as they presented a one-act play called "*The Ruggies Family Come to Life,*" based on The Christmas Carol. Their glee club sang, members presented readings, and there was a free will offering for charity.

The different triangles (clubs) of Girl Reserves planned plays, recitations and dance numbers for their parties. One year, instead of Santa Claus, the Christmas Fairy presented gifts beside a beautiful tree. Gift exchanges were restricted to items costing no more than 10 cents

Giving back to the community

Every department of the YW was active in joining with churches and other organizations in giving to the needy, as were many of the groups meeting there. They reached out to the girls at the Muncy State Home and children under the care of the Children's Aid Society. The Tuberculosis Society provided toys and filled stockings with candy canes, popcorn and books for these children. One year, the hosts were worried that the poor children might be afraid of Santa Claus; the paper reported that Santa made sure to shake each child's hand.

The Business Girls' Club entertained 50 little girls between the ages of 8 and 10 chosen by the heads of local welfare agencies — the Salvation Army, Social Service Bureau, Mothers' Assistance Fund and State Nursing Service. There were relay races, singing contests, the Christmas story and stockings filled with nuts, taffy, books and paint boxes.

A party hosted by the Hi-Tri Club for children from the Children's Aid Society provided ice cream, compliments of Wakenhuts Ice Cream

Company. The Girl Reserves invited 20 children from the Home for the Friendless and held a separate party for "*tiny tots*" from there as well. Some years, a poor family would be selected for the gift of a Christmas tree and presents.

The girls would cut stories from "*good*" periodicals, bind them into book form and present them to patients at the Williamsport Hospital, making picture books for children who were patients.

The Girl Reserves were always involved with the distribution of Christmas seals for the Lycoming County Tuberculosis Society, folding the stamps and placing them in envelopes. One year, they processed more than a million stamps.

At the Walnut Street Branch for Negro Girls of the YW, there were activities for the holidays as well. The Phillis Wheatley High School Group practiced a pageant to be given at Shiloh Baptist Church and held a special Christmas service at the Home for Aged Colored Women. They took baskets to needy families, and the girls made baby clothes for the Children's Aid Society.

Bazaars and annual sales

The holidays presented fundraising opportunities. Girl Reserves held an annual bazaar that offered unique Christmas gifts at reasonable prices, with items imported through New York City dealers that, according to the newspaper in 1927, represented "*indescribable loveliness.*" Shoppers could select from pottery, linen and brasses from Spain, Denmark, Hungary, Italy and Morocco and enjoy the refreshment booths. These

girls had “*occupied their leisure hours*” designing note cards and making marbled paper for score pads and blotters for sale as well.

There was another December event sponsored by the YW of “*unusual and exceptional gifts*” from China, secured by Mrs. Mabelle Hickcox Yard, a YW official located in the Near East. Offerings included gold thread hangings, tapestries, jewelry from Peking and lounging pajamas from Kashig. A 1928 newspaper advertised the merchandise with the phrase “*enticing articles from the Orient captivate beholders.*”

During this holiday season, as you drive by the vacant lot at the corner of Mulberry and East Third Street, hear the echoes of laughter, joy and good will coming from a building in Williamsport’s past.

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