

This Week in Saratoga County History

Christmas in Saratoga 1963

Submitted by Jim Richmond December 20, 2023

Jim Richmond is a local independent historian who volunteers at the Saratoga County History Center at Brookside Museum in Ballston Spa. His current focus is developing programs for the museum, including presentations, tours and videos of Saratoga County communities.



Skidmore News December 12, 1963

The front page of the December 12, 1963 edition of the *Skidmore News* published by the students of the college then located along Union Avenue in Saratoga Springs offered stories fit for the upcoming Christmas holiday season.

In the headline article "College Observes Annual Tradition: Choirs Present Christmas Service" Christmas Vespers was to be presented twice that season on December 15 in College Hall. The article noted that the program had been "Under preparation for weeks and begins with a candlelight procession by the College Chorus and the Freshman Chorus, 130 voices in all."

On December 19th the annual Freshmen Christmas Caroling was to be held. Split into three groups, the students would roam the campus with their Christmas melodies. Class president Judy Harris enthused that the event was a "wonderful way to herald in the Christmas spirit."

Joseph Bolton, Professor Emeritus of English and former Chairman of the Department was to continue a 25-year-old tradition of reading Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". Professors of the Music Department would present their annual Madrigal concert in Little Theatre on Regent Street

entitled "Christmas through the Ages". The concert would begin with Gregorian Chants and conclude with contemporary Christmas pieces.

By all appearances the Christmas holiday had captured the attention of the students as they celebrated the season as they always had in years past. But this year was not like all other years for these students, the city of Saratoga Springs or the nation.

On page 2 in a short black bordered article entitled "In Memoriam" the editors tried to make sense and give purpose to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy three weeks prior, fresh and raw in their hearts and minds. "The loss we felt at the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was profoundly personal. We found it almost impossible to accept the finality of his death." But the memorial quickly turned to thoughts of the future and his legacy.

Only by our actions in the years to come can our tribute be fulfilled. For we are, above all, the generation to which he spoke and to which he passed the torch. He gave us the hope, the faith, the idealism, and the creativity which we lacked...In a few short years he kindled a spirit and an energy which we must now use to realize the dreams and ideals for which John F. Kennedy lived.

The tributes to President Kennedy continued over several pages. In a long prescient poem written only three days after the assassination, Robert Albert put his finger on the inconsistencies that is America. It could have been written in 2023.

If we love our country we must love our Presidents; they are all we share
For we are a nation of diverse men of particularized sentiments.
If we cannot love our Presidents, we are destined to hate one another
For we will be without that general love that would nurture our more specific hearts.

Among our many traits and ways we are fondest of recalling are those individualistic.
But it seems to be always our differences which pique our interest,
Catch our minds and motivate our polity; and in these acts, repel us from one another.
In our history we have been far too easy with such sensible differences,
And have left ourselves far too innocent of that which we hold in greater common.

Another issue that was on the minds of Skidmore students during that holiday season sixty years ago was civil rights. Speaking at an NSA banquet at the college, Dr. Erwin Levine, Assistant Professor of Government called on students to defend their beliefs on civil rights in the upcoming election, indicating that it was "our responsibility not to accept or reject solutions without carefully examining all the facts of both the problems and the solutions." He lamented that the extreme positions on both sides of the debate "have been leading the center around by its nose."

Dr. Levine went on to warn of these extremes. "The rumblings from the right are as dangerous as the clamor from the left; for the left and right are alike in one essential thing; they represent authoritarianism, not freedom as they allege." Levine's view was that American democracy can

only be defended by those in the center “who, if they but use their reason, can bring about the fulfillments of the American democratic ideal.”

“Town vs Gown” has always been a trite way to describe the differences between college students and residents in small communities like Saratoga Springs. But there is another side to that story. The *News* supported the community as the advertisements by local small businesses attest. Nate Berkowitz, jeweler, advertised Yule time pewter, George Bolster offered “distinctive portraiture”; Ma Goldsmiths, Paramount Pete’s, Country Gentlemen and Quinn’s Colonial Tavern provided great food for hungry students and their visiting parents; and the Swimming Pool Casino enticed students on weekends with something called Happy Sourtime.

Christmas 1963 was nothing like normal. However, I expect that the sentiments expressed in the *Skidmore News* during the holiday season of 1963 – the traditions, the sorrows, the focus on the here and now as well as the future – were shared by both students and local residents that holiday season. And maybe even today.

Source: Skidmore News, Volume 39, Issue number 8, December 12, 1963 can be read in full at <https://digitalcoll.skidmore.edu/record/>