

The History of Famous Figures in Illinois at Christmas

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
December 26 2023 3:04 PM



ILLINOIS - What does Abraham Lincoln, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and a favorite Christmas carol have in common?

According to historian Tom Emery, all three are connected to the state of Illinois. Emery explained that Christmas has changed a lot through the ages, but the holiday has a long history in the Prairie State.

Abraham Lincoln

Like a lot of people in the 1830s, future president Abraham Lincoln was aware of Christmas, but he didn't do much to celebrate. Emery spoke of Lincoln's time living in New Salem, about 20 miles north of Springfield, while he was a state legislator.

"I would like to tell you some stories about what he did at Christmas. Frankly we don't know a whole lot about what he did," Emery said. "One reason for this is because Christmas was just not as big of a deal in the 1830s as it is today. Christmas celebrations were just a tiny fraction of what we know today."

The holiday was "a blip on the radar" for most people, especially families in rural areas like New Salem. Emery said most people were simply focused on the day-to-day tasks of winter life back then.

Christmas would have been considered a working holiday, and Lincoln likely attended meetings and wrote letters throughout the day before coming home for a meal with his family. People sometimes exchanged a few small gifts, and Christmas trees weren't common.

"He certainly would have been aware of Christmas," Emery added. "Lincoln knew exactly what was going on in the world. I can't believe to this day people believe he was some kind of country bumpkin. Lincoln was a brilliant, shrewd man."

Christmas celebrations evolved after the Civil War, especially in 1865 in the months after the war ended. Dances became a big part of the holiday. More houses decorated with greenery, though Christmas trees wouldn't become the norm until the 1890s. Stationary, ladies' handkerchiefs and books were popular gifts, according to many of the advertisements that Emery has studied. Oysters were a delicacy for holiday meals.

Slowly but surely, Christmas Day overtook New Year's Day as the more widely-celebrated holiday. People also became more focused on the Christian history behind Christmas.

"New Year's Day was a bigger deal in this country for a long time than Christmas Day," Emery said. "As the late 1800s, early 1900s went on, was very prominent...Church services were a big part of what you did because Christmas had a more evangelical feel where today it's more informal and relaxed. Back then, the people saw the deeper meaning in the holiday and Christianity was much more prevalent in the 1800s than it is now."

"It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas"

Most people are familiar with the Perry Como and Bing Crosby versions of this song, but did you know there's a connection to Brighton, Illinois?

"That song was written in 1951 by Meredith Wilson, who was a top composer in the United States in the mid-20th century," Emery said. "And his claim to fame as far as Brighton is concerned: His mother had grown up and was married in Brighton. She later accepted a teaching job in Mason City, Iowa, where he was born. He spent summers with his grandmother in Brighton, so he was back in Brighton quite often."

Wilson was fond of Brighton, and while he never lived there, he continued to pay homage to the town in his work. In addition to the famous Christmas song, Wilson is best-known for writing "The Music Man," a famous Broadway musical with multiple film adaptations. The Village of Brighton is mentioned in the 1962 movie adaptation of the musical.

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"

Robert May was used to being an outcast. So when his employer, retail corporation Montgomery Ward, asked him to write a children's book that could be given out to Christmas shoppers, he drew on his own experiences as a shy, down-on-his-luck man to write about a reindeer with a peculiar nose.

"The idea of Rudolph originated as a storybook in 1939, and the original Rudolph in the storybook, which sold like hot cakes at the time, wasn't very different from the Rudolph we know today," Emery explained. "It was written by Robert May."

May was living in Chicago at the time, struggling to pay for his wife's cancer treatments after the Great Depression and feeling unfulfilled as a copywriter at Montgomery Ward. He became invested in the project and even took his daughter to Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago to study the reindeer. The book, which was a major success, was eventually adapted into a song by May's brother-in-law.

There's a lot of history behind Christmas, but Emery especially enjoys learning about Christmas in Illinois. He encourages more people to think about how the holiday has grown and changed over the years.

"I think you can really learn a lot," he added. "Learn about us as people, what we did in different eras and just really appreciate the culture we've created in this country."