

"Christmas Tree": Celebrating Christmas in Austin in Bygone Days

By Serge Wagner, Local Heritage Council

For nearly 150 years in Austin territory, the population impatiently awaits the cold and snow, for the muddy roads of fall finally become practicable. Sleighs can then travel on the dirt roads; Lake Memphremagog, once frozen, becomes a huge highway linking the procession of hamlets dotting the landscape between Magog and Newport, Vermont.

At the farm, the men mend broken implements and go hunting. A single moose provides food, tallow for candles and a pelt to make shoes or winter blankets. The women add to their usual domestic chores, making both cloth and clothing. As for the children, they get out their toboggans and skates.

Abundant snow finally allows entry into the forest to extract timbers, which are then taken to the mill by teams of oxen or horses. Lumbering is usually done in small groups for both efficacy and security. Already, in November, Christmas trees are harvested for both the provincial and U.S. markets. The sale of Christmas trees is fast becoming a major stream of supplemental income for the region.

The onset of winter is also marked by a great community celebration called "Christmas Tree", a tradition imported by the American settlers. Even though the festivities are often linked to the

Methodist Sunday School, it is more a community gathering than a religious one. Everyone - including the handful of resident French-speaking Catholics - is invited to attend, no matter his or her religion.

Presided by a master of ceremony, the celebration features entertainment especially prepared for the occasion: readings, poetry, skits, a distribution of gifts (usually consisting of an orange and some candies), speeches and the national anthem. All talents participate: school children, amateur musicians (piano, violin, guitar, harmonica, etc.). And the abundance of food (even fresh oysters, sometimes) would seem as a way to stave off the difficult months ahead.

Santa Claus makes his appearance around 1870, yet for a long time Christmas Tree continues to be the great gathering that strengthens the communal links within the hamlets. Solidarity reinforcement is indeed essential, for everyone depends on his neighbours: for farming and forestry work, for maintaining the roads, for firefighting, and much more. The celebration is also a family affair, for many of the participants are related to each other.

For a long time, the two neighbouring hamlets of Thompson's Mills/Millington and Peasley's Corner compete against each other. In the 1890s, however, Millington prevails thanks to a great

driving force: Aylmer Place, merchant and head of the Methodist Sunday School. At times, hundreds of people gather in the new hall to celebrate Christmas Tree. After 1912, the festivities are held alternately in each of the two hamlets until, ultimately, Peasley's Corner wins out.

Christmas Tree was celebrated for over a century. Sometimes, rain or sleet made the return home difficult but then, mutual assistance allowed each and every one to make it safely back home.

In the years after WWII, Christmas Tree fades away along with the traditional rural way life: family farming dies out, small schools and the Methodist Church close, roads are opened year-round, demographic and economic processes alter society, and Christmas becomes commercialized...

Nowadays, Christmas is celebrated in other ways.



Citizens gathered in the Protestant church of Peasley Corner at Christmas time
(Source: Austin Historical Archives)

East Bolton.
Abel Bryant had four sheep, and Mrs. Wesley Taylor two more killed by unknown dogs, lately.... Our Christmas anniversary was held at Millington Saturday night, the 23rd inst. Two trees were well filled and the church crowded with expectant faces. Singing and music, speeches, &c., made a merry Christmas to all.... A donation and oyster

East Bolton.
Our Christmas entertainment was held at Peasley Corner church on Christmas eve, and was a pleasant affair. The trees bore good fruit and rejoiced the recipients. Good music was furnished by Mr. Phimmes and others. Also Thomas and the Misses Vaughan played and sang a nice piece. Aylmer Place filled the chair mentally and physically. The Sunday School children had some excellent pieces and the evening passed pleasantly away. Mr. Place gave presents to all the scholars at Millington, also

EAST BOLTON.
A splendid Xmas Tree program was given at the United Church on the evening of Dec. 20th. Much credit goes to the three local teachers and their pupils for its success. Rev. J. Stark ably acted as chairman for the evening's entertainment.