



# The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild and the Novato History Museum

FEATURE SECTION

Contents © 2003 Novato Historical Guild, Inc.

December 2003

Preserving Novato's History

Vol. 27, No. 4

## Christmas in Old Novato

by May Ungemach

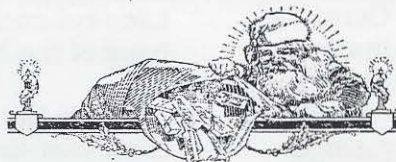
The Christmas season was a heartwarming and very special time for early Novato residents, just as it is for many who presently call Novato home. Families and friends gathered to celebrate and fortunately, some family members left a record of their Christmas memories so that we may share in those bygone happy days.

Anyone who grew up in Novato the first half of the last century had great respect and affection for the Trumbull family — Robert and Edith, their daughter Helen and son, Robert Jr. ("Bob"). The Trumbull home was a happy, bustling place during the holiday season. A conspiracy began on Christmas Eve to protect the wonderful surprise that would occur the following morning. The downstairs fireplaces were decorated with bright red berries found at the "H" Ranch. A 14 foot tree was cut down from among those growing on the "F" Ranch, brought into the house with great secrecy and decorated with candles set in lead holders and homemade ornaments. The children didn't have the slightest inkling of what was going on. That made Christmas morning so special — the sight of that glorious, glowing tree placed at the end of the hall would have been enough but there was more. Mrs. Trumbull's sister, Mrs. Marie Leavenworth, had made herself a genuine Santa Claus suit, and being rather short and inclined to be roly-poly, she made a perfect Santa — right down to the shiny black boots. When little Robert was

called to look out of the window and saw Santa Claus in person in his very own yard, it was almost more excitement than he could stand. Santa actually came inside to hand out the gifts. What child could ask for more? It was years before anyone could convince young Robert that there was no real Santa Claus. After all, he had seen Santa with his own eyes!

The Trumbulls' Chinese cook labored for days preparing a dinner for about 18 family members. Seated about the huge table, they feasted upon a giant broadbreasted turkey — one of the Whites raised on their own ranch. Mrs. Trumbull's brother had brought the first broadbreasted Whites into California and the Trumbulls raised their own from eggs he had given them. The bookkeepers, the ranch hands and their children, and neighbors in the valley participated in the celebration. Of course, there was the singing of Christmas carols.

Another early Novato resident, Mrs. Gertrude Simonds Serres, remembered how much she enjoyed visiting the Trumbull home when she was a child. She said "The Home Ranch was the homestead for all of us children. Mr. and Mrs. Trumbull were the most wonderful people. I think they were the only ones who could afford to give the kids any parties — all the farm children were invited."



Mrs. Serres had many happy memories of her own family's celebrations while growing up in Novato. She especially recalled the Christmas dinners cooked by her Grandmother Goddard for the whole family at her grandparents' home in San Francisco. Grandmother Goddard would be a month getting ready. Before Christmas, all the curtains got washed, as did the chandeliers. In those days, houses had front and back parlors with a sliding door in between. In the Goddard home, the back parlor was used as a bedroom, but when Christmas came, that room was cleared out. Everyone got up at 5:00 in the morning. The beds went down in the basement along with everything else that had been in the back parlor. All the tables and benches grandfather Goddard had built were brought upstairs and put in place. There were plenty of dishes and more than enough silverware to set places for 30 people. There was one table for adults and another for children. The oldest teenager was put in charge of the children's table and was expected to make them behave.

Grandmother Goddard's specialty was a typical English Plum Pudding. It was brought in, brandy was poured over it, the lights were turned out and the and the brandy was set afire. The children thought it was wonderful. They would sit at the tables for hours.

continued on pg F2, see Christmas



# Christmas

*continued from page F1*

Grandfather Goddard would sing a lot of family songs and the family was invited to join in. Then he would call on each person to get up and say something. Some would sing a song or recite a poem. Gertrude Simonds said her grandmother cooked Christmas dinner for years until she was nearly 80 years old.



Frances Bond ca.1914

Memories of Christmas in Novato were shared by Mrs. Frances Bond McGlauflin whose father, John Bond, was the editor of Novato's first newspaper, *The Marin County Banner* [1901-1919]. Born in San Francisco, Frances Bond was brought to Novato by her parents at a very young age. She majored in Journalism and worked for the *Petaluma-Argus*, as well as the *Novato Advance*. In the October 7, 1957 issue of the *Advance*, Mrs. McGlauflin wrote a column entitled *I Remember*. In it, she wrote: "I remember the wonderful Christmas parties at the Presbyterian Church, the gigantic tree lighted with candles with fluted bases. Every child received a gift basket with extras set well back of the tree in case any unexpected small one appeared. For many of these entertainments my father was Santa Claus. He entered through windows, back doors and surprise entrances to the delight of the

kiddies. Knowing everyone in the community so intimately, he kept up a running conversation calling each child by name as he distributed the gifts."

More Christmas cheer may be found in the following article written by Mrs. Frances Bond McGlauflin for her *Down Memory Lane* column in the December 1967 issue of the *Novato Advance*:

"Up in the little white church the choir was singing 'Deck the Halls with Holly' as they practiced for the Christmas cantata. We didn't deck our home halls with holly, but we did make thick garlands of fragrant redwood and pine. In the downstairs windows we placed homemade wreaths and tied each with a huge red bow of satin ribbon. We didn't know about plastics or any other extra flourishes done in synthetic materials. The greens were brought in with the Christmas tree from some ranch in the country. They were there for the asking. Usually there were also big bunches of crisp mistletoe. Tied with red ribbon, they hung from the archways connecting the rooms.

As far back as I can remember we always had a big Christmas tree. My brother Earle has perpetuated the memory. This is a tradition he especially appreciates since spending time in Honolulu during the bombing and the ensuing blackouts. There were no Christmas trees on the island of Oahu. My remembrance of the big tree is back to the time when it was lighted by dozens of small crinkly red and green wax candles, each backed by a shiny reflector and held to the branches with solid clamps. True, the candles had to be guarded, one member remaining on watch while the candles burned. Their soft light was shed down on the gingerbread men with pink and white eyes made of icing, and frosted buttons down the front of their fat little bodies. Beneath the fireplace mantle, the stockings hung in a row, one for each eight of us. Some of the ornaments on our tree

went through three generations. Never to be forgotten were the Cinderella slipper, the golden horn of plenty, and the silver and red spoon. Later they hung from my children's tree.

There were only two churches in Novato then. The Catholic Church perched on a knoll in Old Town, below what is now Nave Center. The Presbyterian Church was in the center of Novato township. Here an annual Christmas pageant took weeks of preparation. The biggest tree available was reserved for the church. It was decorated with homemade ornaments, and beneath it gifts for the children were piled high. It was a custom then for parents to bring gifts for their children in addition to the gift and candy from the church. In later years this feature was discontinued as some of the wealthier parents gave offerings so far excelling those of the less affluent families, it was felt the comparison was too great. After this ruling only one nominally priced gift was presented to each child.

During the war years, Novato citizens put in their names to the Presidio and Navy bases for men serving there, inviting them to come up on the old Northwestern train to spend Christmas Day in a family circle. There were no buses. Spending the day with their hosts, they were taken on rides through the surrounding country while the turkey simmered. Many long lasting friendships were made during these holidays.

There were no recordings to bring us *White Christmas* or *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, but often the voice of the then famous Richard Jose came from a Victor phonograph, as he sang "*The Holy City, I heard the angels singing and ever they sang.*"

Happy Holidays to all!