

# A Pennsylvania Dutch Christmas: Then and Now

BY KIMBERLY HERR

EXTON — Irma Hooper, of Intercourse, remembered when Christmas morning meant receiving a big, juicy orange from her grandfather.

Irma, the oldest of eight children, remembered that they did not eat turkey on Christmas.

"The food that I remember most is that we had goose on Christmas day," Irma said.

Some of those favorite memories Irma, wife of Charlie Hooper, continued and passed along to her daughter, Joyce Hershey, wife of Art Hershey. Joyce, in turn, has continued them with her own children.

Irma, Joyce, and Joyce's

daughter, Julie, gathered at the Chester County Library Wednesday night to entertain their audience with a program on how the Pennsylvania Dutch celebrate Christmas in both Lancaster and Chester Counties.

As the program began, Joyce defined what they meant by the Pennsylvania Dutch.

"We're thinking of the plain people, the Amish and the Mennonites," said Joyce, who is of the Mennonite faith. She explained that both her family and her husband's family came to the United States around 1719 or 1720.

Joyce related to the group the memories she had of Christmas both as a child and as a mother

herself.

"The person of Christmas is the very basis of our Christmas," Joyce said, explaining that the religious aspect of Christmas was important to her family. "We always had a nativity scene and it was usually one that the children could play with, moving the figures around as they learned the Christmas story."

Joyce then turned the program over to her mother who had some memories of when she was a child.

"We weren't taught to believe in Santa Claus," Irma said. "But we children always hung our stockings."

Many of Irma's memories revolved around the food of the holiday season. She explained that certain foods were not always available as they are today, and it was a special treat to eat those foods over the holidays.

"Oysters were special to my family," Irma said. She also remembered eating dates, stuffed with peanuts and rolled in sugar. And celery was a nice Christmas dish.

"You always tried to save it so you could have home-grown celery for Christmas," Irma said. She also spoke of a certain dish that was especially designed to hold celery, causing many in the audience to nod their heads as their memories matched Irma's.

Aside from the food, Irma remembered attending a one-room schoolhouse where Christmas meant special plays and recitations.

"The older boys at the school would go and get the tree," Irma remembered. She also recalled someone dressed as Santa Claus coming to the school and handing out boxes of candy.

When Irma married and had five children of her own, a new tradition was born. Each of her children played a musical instrument, and that meant home concerts at Christmas. One year, they even traveled to a nursing



Three generations gathered in Chester County Wednesday night to share their Christmas memories. Seated is Irma Hooper. Her daughter, Joyce Hershey, is pictured at left, and Joyce's daughter, Julie is on the right.

home to entertain the guests there.

These memories were shared by Joyce, who reflected on how she has continued many of these traditions in her family. For example, she still gives her children - she has four - oranges in their Christmas stockings.

Julie, Joyce's daughter, explained how she used to hang a paper chain, which had the days before Christmas numbered on it, on her bedroom door. Then, as each day passed, she tore off a link. It was only in preparation for this program that she learned that her grandmother had made paper chains as a child, but they were used for decoration, not to count the days before Christmas.

As the program concluded, the three women invited the audience to help themselves to the many Christmas goodies. Mulled cider, puffed wheat balls, dipped peanut butter crackers, raisin cookies and sand tarts were offered.

During this time, many of those in the audience shared their own memories of Christmas. Some remembered favorite cookies, while one woman remembered special days doing pre-Christmas baking with her grandmother.

One woman in the audience seemed to sum up the feelings of the evening.

"It's so nice to hear about other people's traditions," she said.



Participants at the Pennsylvania Dutch Christmas program got to sample some of the traditional goodies, such as chocolate-dipped peanut butter crackers and ribbon candy.

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