



The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

# PROSPECTOR

December, 2006



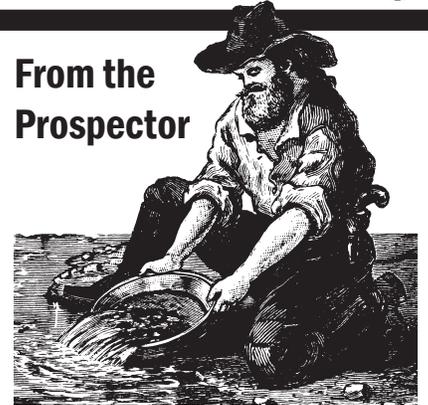
## Christmas in the West

Christmas traditions in America had been well established by the time Idaho was founded, but Christmas on the frontier brought many challenges as families sought to maintain their familiar holiday customs. In the West, probably one of the first Christmas celebrations was held by Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery in the winter of 1805. The expedition had reached the Oregon Coast and was waiting for the warmer spring weather in a small fort they had built. The men celebrated the holiday by firing

their rifles and singing. Later, Lewis and Clark gave presents to their men out of the few supplies they had left, handkerchiefs and tobacco. Christmas on the frontier was sometimes just like any other day. Miles from any big city, fur trappers living in the West were more concerned about surviving the brutal weather than having a party. David Thompson, an explorer and fur trapper wrote in the early 1800's "Christmas and New Years day came and passed. We could not honor them, the occupations of every day demanded our atten-

*Continued on next page*

## From the Prospector



## Howdy Prospectors

Shhhhh, I'm wrapping my mule's Christmas present and I don't want him to know what I got. He's a nosy critter and it seems like every year he figures out what his gift is before the big day. This Christmas he wanted a Game Boy, but I think his hooves are too big to hit the buttons. I got him something a little more practical, a new feed bag. I know it might not seem exciting to you, but that critter loves his oats. Happy Holiday. I'll see you next month.

*Lucky Noah*

## Christmas in the West Continued

tions; and time passed on, employed in hunting for a livelihood." Most of the mountain men were alone and the holiday was not remarkable in any way, but sometimes the lonely men got together and tried to have some celebration to keep their spirits up. In 1833, one man wrote in his journal at a Hudson's Bay Company trading post. "This being Christmas day I gave the men a liberal regale of eatables and drinkables, to make up in some measure for the bad living they have had all year here, and they enjoyed the feast as

might be expected men would do who lived solely on soup since they came here. Weather still very cold."

Christmas and its traditions were first introduced to the Indians of Idaho by Jesuit missionaries. In 1842 Father Nicholas Point and Father de Smet traveled to present day Northern Idaho to bring Christianity to the Coeur d' Alene Indians. The Sacred Heart Mission was decorated for the Christmas holiday and Father Points invited the local people to participate.

For the pioneer families who

arrived a few years later, Christmas was an event filled with bittersweet memories. The pioneers were often far away from families in the East and they had fewer resources available to help them celebrate. Food, gifts, decorations were all hard to come by, so they had to be creative in making these things. While some gifts were ordered from catalogs, most were hand made such as dolls, clothes and toys of all sorts.

The tradition of Santa Claus was popular among children on the frontier as well and a journal called



## Christmas in the West Continued

“St. Nicholas” was available for children out West. This journal was published from around the early 1800’s to the 1940’s. It was designed for children in isolated areas and included 500 pages of stories, poetry, contests, games, and crafts. It was particularly helpful in keeping children entertained during the long winter months on the frontier.

The Christmas tree in Europe had been made popular by the Germans and introduced into England by Queen Victoria’s husband Albert. Americans’ too have always enjoyed the tradition of having a tree as the center of our celebrations. The pioneers were no exception. If they had no tree they simply fastened wooden scraps together in the shape of a tree or gathered sagebrush to decorate. There were some store bought ornaments being made in the 1800’s such as glass balls and eventually electric candles replaced the traditional candles placed on the boughs of trees. But ornaments as a whole in the West were homemade. The decorations could be made from evergreen, berries, clipped pictures, old buttons, lace, ribbons, strings of

apples or paper chains.

In Boise it was the custom in the 1860’s to have a community tree rather than individual ones in homes. The nearest evergreens were on top of the Boise Foothills, which was several miles from the town and for most families it was too far to get a tree. In 1865 *The Idaho States-*

usually not needed because neighbors would help those who were in need, giving gifts to those children who were going through hard times. When families and friends gathered for the day itself, they simply enjoyed each other’s company. They sang carols, told stories of past Christmases, played games, and put

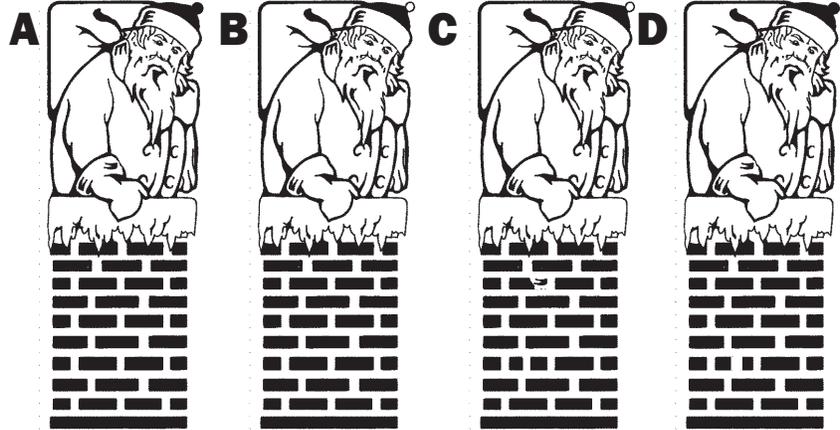
aside a time for individual religious traditions. The clever way in which the pioneer families brought holiday celebrations to the West is a sign of their wanting to make a home, no matter where they found that home to be. Making the most of a tough situation, pioneer Catherine Haun wrote in 1849, “*Although very tired of tent life many of us spent Thanksgiving and Christmas in our canvas houses. I do not remember ever having had happier holiday times. For Christmas we had grizzly bear steak for which we paid \$2.50, one cabbage for \$1.00 and oh horrors, some more dried apples!* And for a Christmas

*present the Sacramento River rose very high and flooded the whole town!”*

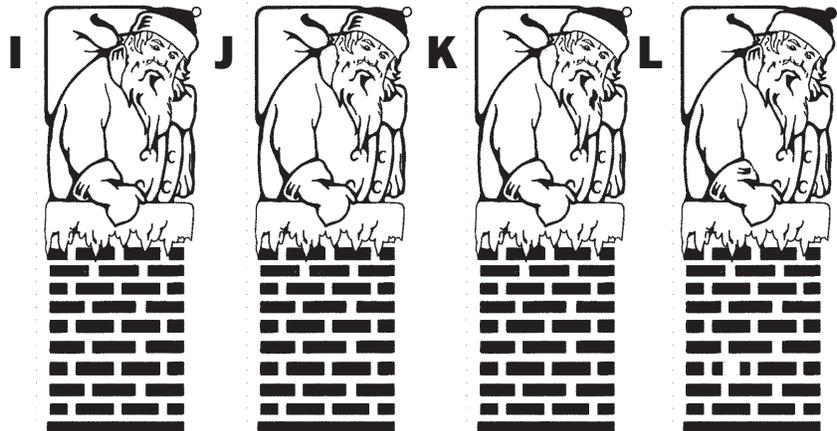
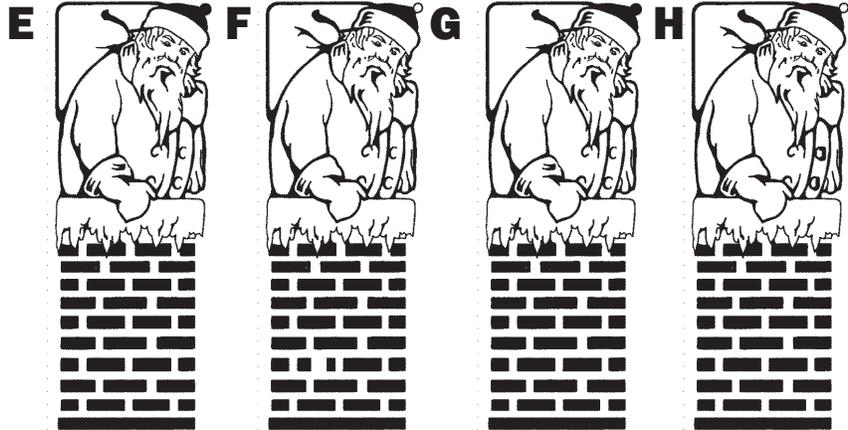
(The information in this article was adapted from the book *Christmas in the Old West A Historical Scrapbook*, by Sam Travers)



*men* announced that “The Christmas Tree will be available to all who wish to communicate through it with their friends.” People could bring gifts for the community tree and a party would follow on Christmas Eve, which was open to everyone to attend. Organized charity was



**Two of these twelve Santas are exactly alike. Look closely and see if you can find the matching pair!**



*Solution: B and I*