

'Feast of lights' in merrie old England

Over 1400 years ago, the Council of Tours decreed that the 12 days through Epiphany, which falls on January 6 were a time of festivity. This day, also known as


"The Feast of Lights," is still observed by many churches.

It became customary through the centuries, for the reigning King of England to open

Twelfth Night revels by throwing dice. In the 17th century, Charles II played for high stakes, winning 150 pounds one year and losing 100 pounds the next, both tremendous sums for

that period. Festivities included choosing a King and Queen of the feast. Slices of a plum cake containing a bean and a pea were served and the man who got the bean

and the woman who got the pea were crowned King and Queen. With toasts to the royal pair, the party got into full swing. Revels wound up with final kisses under the mistletoe.




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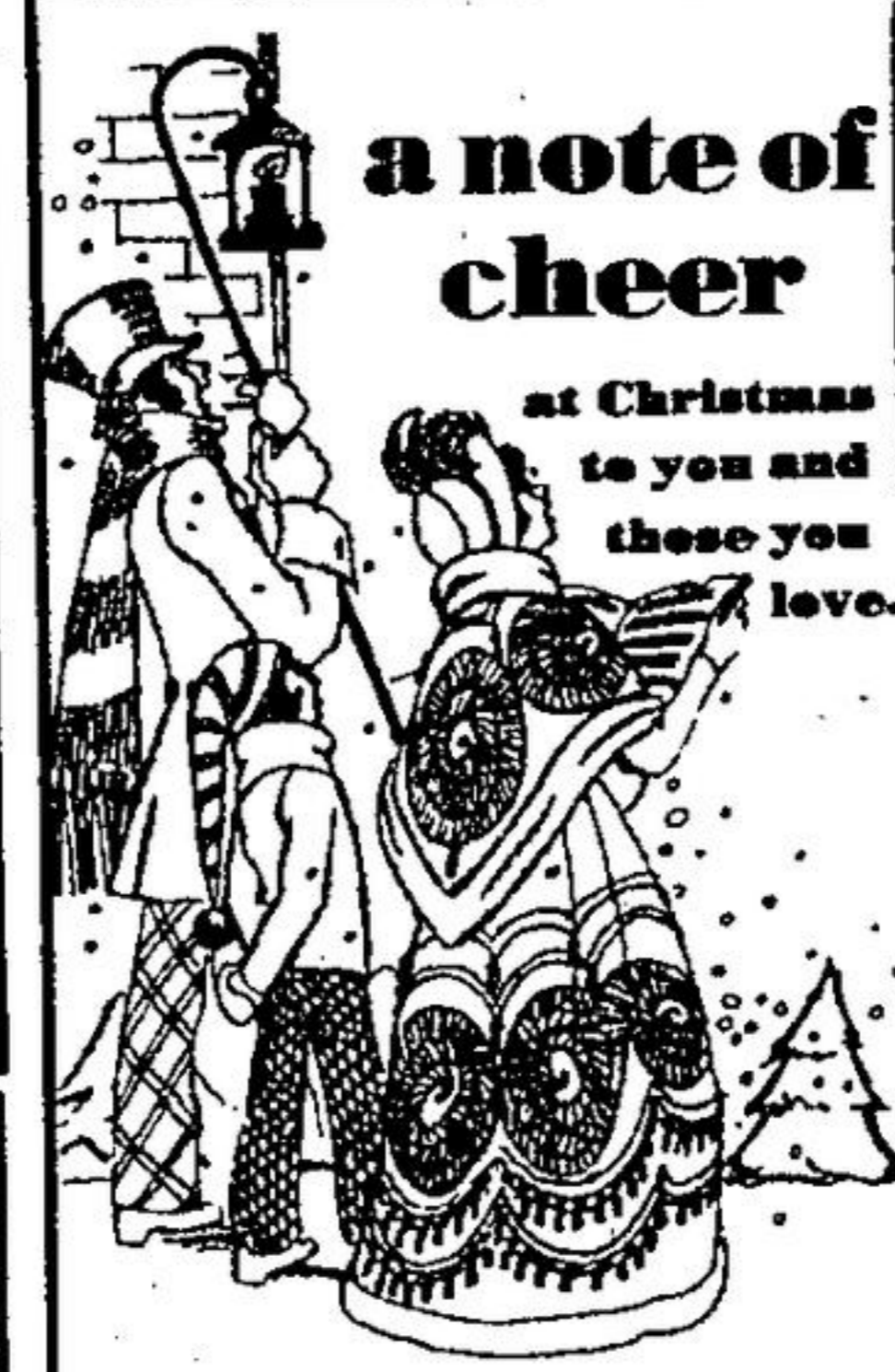
Ivan Crabtree



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Music expresses man's feelings at Christmas

Across the centuries, man has looked to music to express his happy feelings at Christmas time.

From the medieval "Hail, Mary, full of grace" to the modern "White Christmas" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" songs have been a favorite part of Christmas celebrations.

In the tradition of Christmas music there are simple carols blending reverent wonder with quiet joy—Martin Luther's "Away in a Manger" (for instance) or the mid-nineteenth century hymns "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," "We Three Kings of Orient Are" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

There are merry songs, celebrating the jolly mood of the Yuletide, such as the time honored "Deck the Halls," or the modern "Rudolph" and "Frosty the Snowman."

Composers Inspired
Famous composers have had Christmas inspiration for some of their most renowned music. At Christmas, and Easter too, people gather to hear performances of Handel's "Messiah," Bach's Christmas "Oratorio" and Berlioz's "L'Enfance du Christ" are other examples of "serious" music often specially performed at Christmas.

Twentieth century composers, too, have written music around Christmas themes. Probably the most familiar example is Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors," an opera commissioned for television and performed annually. Honegger's "Christmas Cantata" and Britten's "Ceremony of Carols" are other notable examples.

To Honor St. Basil
Since the herald angel sang, bringing "glad tidings of great joy" to shepherds watching their flocks, the people of many lands have contributed to the history of Christmas hymns and carols.

In the fourth century, St. Basil the Great of Greece emerged victorious in his struggle for Christianity with the Byzantine Emperor Julian. To celebrate this victory, a musical poem or carol was sung in his honor.

The first day of the New Year is

still celebrated as St. Basil's day in Greece, and children receive their "Christmas" gifts on that day.

In Tudor Times
In England during Tudor times, Christmas celebrations began on All Saint's Day, November 1, and continued until Candlemas, on February 2. "The Lord of Misrule" acted as a master of ceremonies at the Yuletide festivities.

Much of the music for all this merrymaking was extemporaneous. Many songs were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation—songs such as "The Boar's Head Carol," referring to the "board" or pig which was traditional at the Yule feast, and "The First Nowell".

First in U.S.
First Christmas carol composed in the United States was the work of an 18th century leather worker named William Billings. A tanner by trade but a tunesmith by inclination, Billings composed the carol, "A Virgin Unspotted."

The song isn't one that is still sung, and few hymnals now include it, but carol singers today owe William Billings a considerable debt of gratitude.


During Puritan times in England, the singing of carols and, indeed, the whole celebration of Christmas, was banned. The Puritan-minded American colonists followed suit.

It was William Billings, more than any other individual, who managed to persuade the Puritan New England settlers that singing songs at Christmas wasn't sinful.

Source of Song
Among the well-loved Christmas hymns is "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear". The words to this one were written by a Unitarian minister of Weston, Mass., named Edmund H. Sears. Time? Just about a hundred years ago.

One melody of this hymn was composed by a Detroit journalist and editor; another melody was adapted from an old British folk tune by a composer better known for his long string of lighthearted operetta hits. This was Sir Arthur Sullivan; of the team of Gilbert and Sullivan.

"May this Christmas Season bring to each and every one peace and joy and the prospect of a Happy and Satisfying New Year."



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Christmas Greetings

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