

BACK IN TIME

Holidays of yore in Lansdale

By **DICK SHEARER**

Tradition plays a big part in celebrating the holiday season in Lansdale but don't think for a minute that tradition hasn't changed over the years.

For 60 years we've ushered in Christmastime with the Mardi Gras parade that oddly-named annual event that still draws many thousands of spectators.

Although holiday parades were around long before the Mardi Gras name was attached to them, sacred, not secular, celebrations came first to the village.

In fact, during Lansdale's formative years (the 1870s) there was scant mention of Christmas in the local newspaper. Christmas was primarily a religious holiday that was celebrated in churches, not the local stores. And in 1870, that was a problem because there were no churches in Lansdale.

But soon congregations were formed, churches were built and the religious aspects of the holiday drew more attention. Of course, the business district was also growing by leaps and with it came the commercialism of Christmas.

The 1886 Christmas Excursion cantata performed by the Baptist church seems like an odd mix for the time – a blend of Santa and the sacred. There was no follow up report on the cantata's success nor was a similar event held in 1887. Maybe, just maybe, a trip through Storm King Valley was a bit over the top.

Over the years the idea of a "community Christmas" celebration evolved, especially after World War I when the newly-formed William E. Hare American Legion post coordinated the festivities.

In 1920, for example, a 48-foot community Christmas tree was erected on the lawn of the Hotel Tremont. The tree was painstakingly decorated, but unlike today its colorful lights weren't turned on until 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

The actual community celebration took place around the tree at 9 a.m. on Christmas Day. It was followed by a short parade in which the children were driven around town in automobiles. The schools and churches participated as did the civic clubs.

A key element of the community celebration involved giving to the poor. Throughout December merchants and townspeople identified families in need and distributed food and gifts to them on

Santa's Admirers Out to Greet Him at Lansdale



Many Lansdale kiddies could not wait for the formal reception exercises on Saturday and made their way to the Frederick Farm where Pilot Gene Geuther landed with St. Nick. Some of the young greeters are shown above with Santa.

Christmas Eve.

Jumping ahead to 1931 when the nation was caught in the grip of the Great Depression Lansdale was ablaze in holiday lights. One of the most impressive displays was at the Dexdale hosiery mill (now Turbo Lofts). Dexdale's main building, close to a block long, was framed in lights and two large trees were erected at the entrance.

Main Street merchants decorated their windows to the hilt and the borough added strings of lights that illuminated the roadway.

More than 1,500 townspeople, mostly children, gathered at the railroad station on a December Saturday to greet Santa. St. Nick arrived aboard one of those new-fangled electric trains that were put in service earlier in the year. After a brief parade

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through the business district during which he received the official key to Lansdale from Mayor E.K. Bean, Santa settled into the task at hand – walking Main Street to greet shoppers and collect gift lists from the wide-eyed kids.

But the economic downturn was having an impact on the area; more than 300 borough residents received food baskets and gifts from the community.

Take another leap in time to 1940 when the winds of war began to gust. Ironically, on December 7 - exactly a year before Pearl Harbor - Santa arrived in Lansdale not by foot, not by sleigh, not by train, but by airplane.

With pilot Gene Geuther at the controls of a Luscombe cabin plane, Santa slowly circled the town before touching down at the Frederick farm near the

present St. Stanislaus Church. Then he boarded a float for a ride downtown where he was greeted by 3,000 children.

Old St. Nick set up shop for two weeks at 317 W. Main St. where his conversations with the kids were broadcast on loudspeakers to shoppers on Main Street.

In the first year of the Mardi Gras parade (1950), Santa chugged into town on a train but as the parade grew in size he shifted to a float or fire truck so that everyone along the route could see him.

Today Lansdale's holiday celebration stretches across six weeks and includes dozens of special events both sacred and secular. Not lost over the years is the community's commitment to share the joys of the season with those in need just as it has for more than a century.