Christmas in the 1930s

Here at the Hart Museum, Christmas is a big deal. With the help of a team of energetic volunteers, we decorate the house on the first Tuesday after Thanksgiving, and tend to go all out. However, as there are no decorations in the Hart collection, we often wonder what the holidays were like when Hart lived here.

You might think that people in the 1930s, due to the Great Depression, didn't have beautiful, festive trees in their home. Common tree decorations were bells, balls, tinsel and golden haired angels as tree toppers. Glass ornaments dominated the Christmas tree in the 30s - it’s a miracle that so many survived through the years. As we do today, people then saved their decorations that they may have bought in the 20s to use again and again. Initially often sold on street corners, these glass ornaments began to be sold in toy stores and variety stores, often selling out within days.

“So many charming little ornaments can now be bought ready to decorate Christmas trees that it seems almost a waste of time to make them at home,’ one advertisement declared.”

Another embellishment often seen on Christmas trees in the 1930s were beautiful and festive garlands. These were not commercially bought. Rather, people made these themselves, working on them for hours, perhaps while listening to the radio with the family.

During this time, leaving cookies and milk for Santa—and perhaps a few carrots for his reindeer—took off as an American holiday tradition. In this time of hardship, many parents tried to teach their children the importance of giving to others and to show gratitude for the gifts they were lucky enough to receive. To this day, many children still set out cookies and milk for Santa, whether out of the goodness of their hearts or (in less wholesome cases) as a bribe to receive more gifts from the jolly bearded man in the red suit.

Christmas gift giving during the Depression for many was mostly about small handmade items. And usually it was about practicality over luxury. But it wasn’t all austerity and gloom. I found this remembrance of getting an orange in their Christmas stocking, a tradition that continued long after the Depression was over and fresh fruit became more readily available:

“I poured all the candy and nuts out of my stocking into a pile so I could get to that orange right away. After nothing but old apples and bottled peaches for two months, a fresh orange was a special treat. I held it close to my face in both hands and took a big whiff of the sunny, tangy smell. I pulled out my pocketknife and carefully cut through the pebbly skin right in the middle, so I could get my fingers between it and the golden-orange treasure underneath.”

Christmas in the 1930s also made some of the most important contributions of the last 100 years. Like these:

**1930**

For the first time, there are more households using electric lights, and not lit candles, on their Christmas trees.

**1931**

Artist Haddon Sundblom creates the first “Coca-Cola Santa,” which first appears in a Saturday Evening Post ad. Sunblom’s work helped create our modern image of Santa.

**1932**

King George V makes the first Royal Christmas Message, broadcast on the new BBC Empire Service.

**1933**

The Radio City Christmas Spectacular, starring the Rockettes, debuts in New York.

## ****1934****

Composer Felix Bernard and lyricist Richard Smith write “Winter Wonderland.” The first recording of the song came out the same year, performed by Richard Himber and his Hotel Ritz-Carlton Orchestra.

## ****1935****

The world gets a new board game: Monopoly. It quickly becomes the hottest selling game in America that Christmas season.

## ****1936****

Paramount Pictures releases Christmas Comes But Once a Year.This animated short featured Professor Grampy, a recurring character in the Betty Boop shorts. It was Professor Grampy’s only film without Betty Boop, and also the character’s only film in color.

## ****1937****

The Cinnamon Bear makes its radio debut. The show was created to be listened to six days a week between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The series follows twins who search for their missing Christmas star with the help of Cinnamon Bear. Some radio stations still broadcast the series annually. If you haven’t discovered the show yet, you’re in for a real treat! Here’s the first episode:

## 1938

MGM releases a feature length adaptation of A Christmas Carol. Production on the film started in October of 1938, and it was in theaters just weeks later. It opened in December 1938 at New York City’s Radio City Music Hall.

**1939**

The Montgomery Ward Department Store creates a promotional giveaway storybook. The storybook introduced the world to a new Christmas character: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.*