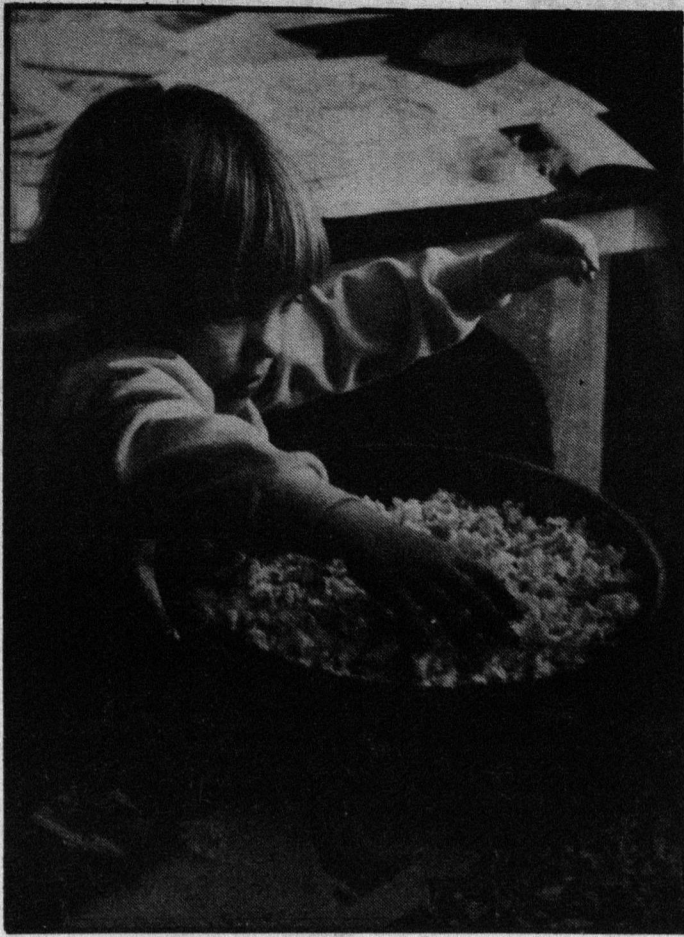


Christmas with the Rutherfords



Not only is popcorn an essential part of a movie, it makes one dandy Christmas tree garland (if it isn't all eaten in the process!)

by Brenda Waddle

Has Christmas commercialism and exam fatigue got you down? Sick of silver Christmas trees and Barbie commercials? Threatening to self-destruct if you hear one more word about the Cabbage Patch dolls? Well, step back into a more tranquil, gracious time, and enjoy a slice of Christmas as Alexander C. Rutherford, Alberta's first premier, and his family did seventy years ago.

photo Tom Huh

"We're all quite excited about our Christmas program," said Frank Milligan, Visitor Services Director for Rutherford House. "The house will be alive with the sights, sounds and smells of a traditional Christmas from the early part of the century, and the atmosphere will serve as a pleasant break for harried Christmas shoppers."

Laurie Glenn-O'Brien, of the Historical Services division of Alberta Culture, said that "the emphasis of the special tours is on how the Rutherfords and the rest of Edmonton celebrated Christmas, and whether the Rutherfords were typical of the time."

The Rutherfords had some very unique customs. Rather than the traditional tree decorated with popcorn strings and tiny candles, the Rutherfords had a Christmas Cactus, because Mr. Rutherford felt it was inhumane to destroy a growing tree for a couple of weeks worth of decoration. As well, at the turn of the century, trees were in short supply around Edmonton. The cactus, which was in full bloom, was left undecorated, but pine boughs, Christmas cards and ribbons were clustered beneath it. Pine boughs were attached to the tops of all the paintings in the house, and cards graced the fireplace mantle, as well as the piano and cabinet tops.

Rather than place the gifts under the cactus, the Rutherfords had what they called a "Christmas Pie." Mrs. Mattie Rutherford wrapped each gift in red tissue paper, and attached a long red ribbon. The gifts were then arranged in a basket in the middle of the dining room table, and the ribbon from each gift extended to the appropriate family member's place, which was also decorated with a Christmas cracker. Each family member would follow the ribbon to find his or her present in the "pie".

Most gifts were homemade crafts, but clothing and other personal items were often ordered out of that bastion of Canadian pioneer life, the Eaton's catalogue. Hankies and fans were always popular gifts. One could order an elegant shirtwaist for 50 cents, and a complete men's suit or a pearl brooch for \$4.50.

Christmas dinner at the Rutherford's was an extravagant affair, as Mrs. Rutherford loved to cook. The appetizers consisted of raw oysters, tomato soup, and boiled cod. Roast turkey with chestnut dressing, and canvas-back duck with currant jelly made up the entrees. Potatoes in many forms were served, as well as asparagus, winter salad, and fried hominy (dried corn which was coarsely ground, boiled, formed into cakes, and fried in butter).

Dessert included plum puddings, mince pie and lemon pie, as well as ice cream, cake, fruits, nuts and raisins. Coffee was served, but no alcoholic beverages were available, as the Rutherfords were very devout Baptists.

Mrs. Rutherford's actual recipes for shortbread and mincemeat have been preserved by her daughter, Mrs. Hazel Rutherford, who is now in her early nineties. The recipes differ substantially from modern recipes, particularly because Mrs. Rutherford used far less sugar. The goodies served to the visitors are prepared from slightly altered recipes, to accommodate for contemporary tastes.

There is a display in the guest bedroom, courtesy of the provincial museum, which includes antique Christmas cards and toys. Many of the oldest cards, which were from the Hallmark Historical Collection, were rather stark black and white, and were like postcards, rather than folded, book-type cards. There was even a sample of the very first Christmas card, which was created by William Egley in 1843.

The toys displayed were typical of the period, and included a tiny china doll, a toy iron, and a small wooden house.

An area has been set up in Mrs. Rutherford's sewing room, for visitors, particularly children, to construct traditional decorations and cards. The cards are made with a cardboard backing, over which is pasted cotton batting, red or green fabric, and then a small Currier and Ives reproduction. The smaller children could simply colour, or help one of the guides construct popcorn strings, or chains of red and green construction paper (they cheat a little and use scotch tape!).

Laurie Glenn-O'Brien said that "visitor feedback has been very positive. Rutherford House is normally only visited by adults, but the Christmas program is very family-oriented. Kids, grandmothers, aunts, everyone comes to get away from the rush for a little while."

Christmas at Rutherford House will continue on December 10 and 11 and December 17 and 18, from 12 noon until 6 PM. Admission is free, so go and join the carollers around the parlour piano and sample Mrs. Rutherford's shortbread. Rutherford House serves as a subtle reminder that there is more to Christmas than Black and Decker commercials.

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