

Holiday Season Comes to Northern Michigan University
Russell M Magnaghi

For the past 122 years the holiday season has been celebrated at Northern Michigan University. In the early days – first twenty years – *The Quill* – forerunner of the *Northern News* and *North Wind* – was filled with stories and recipes from the Domestic Science Department and from the wives of President Kaye and the faculty – Christmas candy, devil cake, maple kisses, plum pudding. Copies of these recipes are available at a table in the rear. Food has been important over the years and today the Culinary Arts department continues to promote seasonal celebrating.

For many decades the foyer of old Kaye Hall, on the site of Cohodas Hall, was the center of campus celebration from 1915 forward. Here the grand stairway was lined with garland and green and gold lights as imposed by Dean of Women, Ethel Carey. She refused the use of traditional red lights as she felt the color red “inflamed” students’ libidos! In response, one year fraternity guys removed all the gold lights and replaced them with red ones much to Carey’s dismay. The foyer was lined with open balconies where the students gathered and sang Christmas carols and awaited the arrival of Santa Claus. It was a truly a festive occasion that has continued to the present with the grand lighting of the tree located by the Northern Center until restricted to zoom by COVID. In its real form it was thoroughly enjoyed by the community and students but especially by young children. This year the tree will be lighted from December 1 through the month, bringing light to a gloomy time of the year.

With the end of classes in mid-December in the early days students walked or took the streetcar that ran from the normal school to the railroad station in downtown. From there they traveled to their homes for the awaited break where they could enjoy home-cooked meals – some things remain constant.

Over the years student and faculty interacted with the community of Marquette to celebrate the season. Beginning in 1914 there was a grand Christmas tree placed in the middle of Washington Street in front of city hall. During the Depression of the 1930s students receiving money from the National Youth Administration were part of the community celebration. Students found the soda fountains in downtown Marquette had Christmas specials. At Doncker’s they could buy boxes of fudge and chocolates as presents. The difficult years of World War II saw alumni far away from home send letters to faculty and others on campus recounting the season from afar.

Music has always been a part of the holiday season with the Northern glee clubs, and the symphony orchestra involved brightening the days both on- and off-campus. The Music Department’s Choral group joined with the community choral and for years has presented Christmas music in the ornate confines of St. Peter Cathedral.

This year the Department of Theatre and Dance is presenting *Elf the Musical* and breaking with tradition, but adhering to NMU’s guidelines *A Christmas Carol* has been recorded remotely and is being presented as a radio show.

For decades president had a special holiday party in the old Great Lakes rooms that was awaited by faculty and staff. It consisted of music, a buffet of foods and desserts. It was a wonderful tradition that brought the campus together for an evening. Unfortunately, COVID has brought this tradition hopefully only to a two-year break.

Although not a campus-wide celebration, Hanukah is the festival of light celebrated for eight days by Jewish students, faculty, and staff but takes place at home. The other holiday celebration is Kwanzaa, a celebration of African-American culture based on an African harvest festival, that is held from December 26 to January 1, culminating in a communal feast called Karamu, usually held on the 6th day. The celebration began on campus in December 1993 and was celebrated for many years but declined as the university is closed during the celebration and it, too, is celebrated at home.

Thank you for allowing me to organize and share this piece of Northern history. I wish everyone, a happy, blessed, and safe Holiday Season.

