



circa 1986

## The First Community Christmas Tree

**A**n evergreen tree in front of the Downers Grove train station has become an official village holiday tradition that goes back 102 years. The Downers Grove Reporter Newspaper explained in several articles how this tradition started.

In 1918, as a way to do something to show appreciation for the many from the village who fought in the First World War, the community tree was proposed. In early December a committee called the Downers Grove Christmas Association met in the real estate office of Mr. Haller to make plans. A tree would be put up by the Congregational Church on Curtiss Street across from the library so all could see it. After asking for a tree to be provided by someone in the village, Walter Scott Bryan (the caretaker of the Marshall Field Estate) donated an evergreen tree worth about \$30.00. Bryan was born in England and came to America in 1880. Bryan's grandson John V. Bryan was one of the soldiers fighting in France and declared missing in action in July of 1918. (His body was never recovered but a memorial service was held in July of 1919.)



Mr. L.E. Jones oversaw moving the large tree on 2 hayracks and with the help of many it was carefully set in place. (It was decided a tree would be planted in the future by the train station as moving a tree was a big job.). Then ornaments had to be collected to decorate the tree. Since many Christmas ornaments were not available because they came from Germany, it was decided to ask the citizens of Downers Grove to donate some. A committee led by Mrs. Minnie Prince requested families to provide some durable ornaments. Active in many village organizations Mrs. Prince was able to collect all that was needed to decorate the tree. The ornaments would be saved and used in the future. Electric lighting was arranged by Mr. J.F. Alderson and Mr. H.A. Gardiner. There would be about 300 10-candle-power bulbs on the tree. Money was donated by churches and other organizations to meet expenses. Any money not needed would be given to War Relief.

During the days before Christmas, programs were planned around the tree and on Christmas night more than 1,000 people came to see the tree and join in

singing songs as the bells of all the churches and schools rang out. All felt the first Christmas tree was a great success. The Reporter Newspaper said “the real Christmas spirit was there from the top of the star on the tree to the edge of the crowd that gathered around the tree. The community spirit of the village will be bigger and better in the years to come.”

Due to the pandemic, the annual tree lighting ceremony will not be held this year...but the spirit and the tradition live on with the tree that stands there today.



## Permit Fees Waived for Owners of Owners of Landmarked Homes

At the July 15, 2020 meeting of the Architectural Design Review Board, the board members approved a Village Staff recommendation that future permit fees be waived for historic landmarks, historic districts and Certificate of Appropriateness applications. This fulfills one of the original goals of the 2015 Ad Hoc Committee for Historic Preservation to ‘Create Financial Incentives’ which would encourage home owners to pursue landmark status for their homes. Since the completion of the redesigned Landmark Preservation Program, 27 homes and 1 historic site have been landmarked in Downers Grove. This program does not restrict remodeling of interiors and does allow for additions and exterior restoration within the program’s guidelines.

For more information about the program and how to apply for landmark status for your home, go to: <http://www.downers.us/govt/historic-preservation/historic-preservation-faqs>



## Mrs. Roe’s Fruitcake

On the day after Christmas in 1936 Mrs. Louise (Maercker) Roe passed away. She was buried in the West Side Cemetery (now called Oak Hill) and this monument was placed on her grave. The holding hands symbolized the devotion of the couple buried here.



Louise Maercker was born on July 1, 1867 on the Downers Grove farm of her parents Charles G, and Anna Oldfield Maercker. She went to the local schools and then on to the Normal School in Michigan to become a teacher. She loved to ride horses and sing. In 1893 she married Charles Ketcham Roe (1858-1941), a supervisor of road construction in the village and devoted church man who always had a song in his heart. Together they had 2 children Thelma and Franklin.

Louise was remembered as a loving mother and wife and a true friend living a useful and simple life. In 1908 when the Congregational Church printed a cookbook with favorite recipes, Louise offered her fruit cake recipe to share with the people of Downers Grove. Her recipe is listed here.

### Mrs. Roe’s Fruit Cake Recipe

One pound of white sugar, one pound of butter, one pound of currants, two pounds of raisins, one quarter pound of citron, eight eggs, beat whites separate, one tablespoon molasses, one cup of buttermilk, one teaspoon of soda, one teaspoon of cinnamon, one teaspoon of cloves. Bake in a slow oven.

Louise and Charles passed on their love of singing and music to their daughter Thelma Roe Milnes who became director of the Downers Grove Oratorio Society which performed the Messiah each Christmas. And Thelma passed this love of music along to her son, famous opera singer Sherrill Milnes. We remember Louise and her fruitcake this holiday season.

## Daisy Bell Lemon and the Christmas Tree

One of the greatest Downers Grove lovers of nature and all things found in it was Daisy Bell Morse Lemon. Born in Michigan in 1874, she married Edward Lemon in Kentucky in 1890 and then moved to Downers Grove in 1894. Daisy became an active member of the Downers Grove Women's Club and was one of the Library Ladies responsible for the establishment of the Carnegie Library.

Daisy took an active interest in protecting the DuPage County forest preserves by creating laws for using the forest preserves, which included protecting the timber, wild flowers and all birds and animals living there. She was considered the unofficial teacher to the girl and boy scouts and women's groups in the study of nature.

When it came to Christmas trees Daisy had some definite ideas. In 1920 she wrote a detailed article for the Reporter Newspaper explaining that the Christmas tree was a symbol of life. Although it was a beautiful symbol of Christmas, it concerned her that so many trees were cut down. Her solution was to replant the Christmas tree after the season. If it was carefully removed with some roots and dirt around the bottom then replanting would be possible. Daisy felt that replanting the Christmas tree would show children the beauty of growing things and teach them about conservation of the forest. Daisy felt the pleasure and happiness of replanting the tree would be a lesson for young and old.

Daisy died of a lingering illness on October 11, 1940. Edward passed away in 1947. Even though Daisy Bell Lemon is gone the love of nature and the lessons she taught lived on after her.



## Happy Holidays!

Here are a few memories from Downers Grove during the holidays from years past. We will be making new memories this year, all with masks on and socially distanced...but memories just the same. May you all enjoy the holiday season and look forward to 2021 with joyful anticipation.



1984 - Mayor Cheever flips the switch on the Christmas Tree lights while Santa looks on.



1980 - Mayor Jon Council does the honors



1985 - Hospitality Day in Downtown Downers Grove

## Don't Forget ... 2021 Dues Will Be Due Soon

Watch for your Historical Society membership dues notice which will be coming out in the next few weeks. Our annual membership dues are used solely to support the preservation of, education about, and promotion of Downers Grove history. Annual rates are as follows:

- Individual \$25
- Family \$40
- Senior(62+)/Student \$15
- Business \$100;
- Life Individual \$250
- Life Couple \$400



1984 - Christmas Parade in Downtown Downers Grove



1980 - Jimmy & Danny Witchert give Santa their wish list while Snow Queen Beverly Ecton looks on.



1961 - Kevin Groce shares his wish list with Santa at the Pepperidge Farm Children's Christmas Party



## Make a Difference in Downers Grove



It's true that you can volunteer, have fun, and not feel like you have a second job. The Historical Society meets once a month in our mission to promote Downers Grove history, although not in a text book, slide show, boring kind of way. We're looking for fresh new ideas that will excite a younger audience about the history all around them. To be more specific, we are looking for people like you who have talents in the following areas:

- Writing
- Social Media
- Public Relations
- Interviewing
- Photography
- Passion for History

You really can make a difference! Reach out to our fearless leader Liz Chalberg at (630) 660-6767, or feel free to send her an email at [president@downersgrove-history.org](mailto:president@downersgrove-history.org). We look forward to hearing from you!

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