

**“A General Time of Indulgence and Festivity”: Early Winter
Holiday Celebrations at the Vancouver National Historic Reserve**

Part II: New Year’s Day

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“Singing, dancing, and all kinds of fun carried on to a late – or rather early – hour in Bachellor’s Hall, ushering in the New Year,” wrote Thomas Lowe, reflecting on the last day of December, 1845. With a few exceptions, the days between Christmas and New Year’s Day were holidays to the employees and families of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Vancouver, and the respite from work, coupled with additional gifts from the Company, made for a lively and often raucous holiday week.

Just as today we celebrate a holiday season, encompassing an array of different holidays and celebrations from late December to early January, so did the early Hudson’s Bay Company employees and families, at locations such as Fort Vancouver and the Village now included within the boundaries of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. At the same time, these nineteenth century celebrations are both very similar to and markedly different from the way we celebrate the holiday season today. With the help of excerpts from the journal of Thomas Lowe, a Hudson’s Bay Company clerk stationed at Fort Vancouver for many years, we can learn much about how the season was celebrated in our community during its formative years.

For the site’s working class employees (known as *engagés*) – many of them of French Canadian, Hawaiian, and Métis heritage – *regales* or special treats of additional food and drink continued to be popular throughout the season, especially before New Year’s Day. In 1844, on account of it “being the last day of the year,” Thomas Lowe recorded in his journal that the fort’s employees

received a regale of beef, flour, and a half pint of rum. Two years later, he noted that they received, “the same as on Christmas, but this time they had a pint of rum to make themselves merry with.” These additional provisions, no doubt, enabled the working class revelry to continue, for beef and flour were highly coveted and alcohol was highly regulated and difficult to obtain.

The week between Christmas and New Year’s Day celebrations also ushered in a continuous flow of social activities for the fort’s gentlemen and their families. Dances, balls, and card parties reigned in popularity. Even the often staid Dr. John McLoughlin, an HBC chief factor for many years, got into the spirit, hosting card parties in his personal quarters during the holiday season of 1844.

As the town of Oregon City grew with increased American emigration, additional leisure activities emerged for HBC employees and their families during the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day. In 1849, many of the fort’s gentlemen brought their families to Oregon City, where they joined local citizens at a ball hosted by Joseph Lane, then governor of Oregon Territory. “A party of the regimental band performed during the evening,” Thomas Lowe wrote, “and the party did not break up until between two and three o’clock in the morning.” The following day, Lowe and friends enjoyed breakfast with the officers of the U.S. Army’s Regiment of Mounted Riflemen, where they “heard their beautiful brass band perform.” For those who think shopping during the holiday season is

a relatively new tradition, consider that Lowe noted that he and his party then “passed the day shopping and strolling” through Oregon City.

All of these social activities continued as the calendar advanced toward New Year’s Day. While today Christmas seems to have eclipsed it as the season’s most popular and celebrated holiday, during the fur trade era New Year’s Day held this distinction.

The dawning of New Year’s Day brought many of the fort’s gentlemen out and about, visiting and conferring upon each other the compliments of the season. Thus, on January 1, 1846, Thomas Lowe noted in his journal that he “visited all of the ladies in the Fort to wish them a Happy New Year and many returns.” Although not considered a religious holiday, religious services were held – always when the holiday fell on a Sunday and occasionally when it did not. Outdoor activities were also popular – weather permitting – including shooting by the fort’s gentlemen. On New Year’s Day 1848, for example, Lowe recorded that “the only way we could enjoy ourselves was taking our guns and pistols and firing at a target.”

A large, formal dinner normally followed at 3:00 p.m., often accommodating visitors and guests. In 1850, the gentlemen at the fort hosted several of the U.S. Army’s artillery officers from the new military post on the ridge just above the fort. “The dinner was kept up until rather an unusual hour at this place,” remembered Lowe, “and one or two of the officers indulged pretty freely.” After dinner, the celebration continued; some years it seems to have been

large and boisterous, in others it seems to have been more intimate and sedate. For example, in 1846, Lowe related that they “had a splendid Ball up in the Hall, which went off remarkably well and was kept up until 3 o’clock in the morning, after which we sat down to supper.” In 1850, Lowe noted that the fort’s Dr. Forbes Barclay hosted a card party in his room, featuring the game of whist.

The coming of January 2 did not necessarily mean the end to the holiday season; it often extended for several days into the new year. For example, in 1846 sailors from the Royal Navy’s HMS *Modeste* thrilled the fort’s employees and families when they put on a series of theatrical performances onboard the vessel, complete with singing and a hornpipe between acts. “We went ashore at about 12 at night highly delighted with the evening’s entertainment,” wrote Lowe.

Soon, however, the celebrations ended and the routine of the fur trade shifted back to its often harsh and humorless nature. “This morning work was resumed,” noted Lowe on January 4, 1848, “and I consequently returned to the office.”

Today, special events such as “Christmas at Fort Vancouver”, held this year on December 8 on the grounds of Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, help connect visitors to these integral traditions and celebrations of the past.

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