

History of Holiday Celebrations at Marymount College

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On June 20, 1920, two months before ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed women the right to vote, the Sisters of St. Joseph laid the cornerstone for what would become Marymount College, the first 4-year college for women in the State of Kansas. Two years later, the doors to this 130,000 square foot Tudor Gothic building, located on a hilltop East of Salina, opened its doors to female students. Here, the Sisters of St. Joseph embarked on a mission to educate women in rural America.

In keeping with their vision for a "values-based education for a living," the Sisters enhanced Marymount's rigorous academic curriculum by engaging students in art, music, theater, business, and physical education activities. Civic and cultural engagement was encouraged year-round, but never more memorably than during the holiday season.

For several decades, Marymount students hosted an annual Christmas Celebration for the children living in St. Joseph's Orphanage, North of Abilene. The first-floor lobby of Marymount's Administration building glowed during the holidays, including a life-sized nativity scene and an ornate Christmas tree. Students performed carols while children received small gifts and holiday treats. Occasionally, Bishop Frank A. Thill would make an appearance dressed as Santa Claus

Reflecting on Christmas at Marymount, alumni recall walking past the beautiful Christmas tree and nativity scene on their way to chapel. Some speak reverently about how it felt to sing from the chapel balcony during Christmas mass. Others remember holiday concerts performed by the choir, the band, and the orchestra under the supervision of Music Director, Eric Stein. Students express appreciation for the formal Christmas dinner hosted each year by the sisters and served in the ballroom, while the Marymount College Singers performed under the direction of Anna Fern Lakin.

Of course, the holiday season also meant writing papers and studying for final exams. Students also remember the Sisters, administrators, and teachers working overtime to serve a "late night breakfast" to students who were up late studying. Dorm residents recall how "Kris Kringle" left small gifts of gum, candy, and Christmas stockings outside their doors during the holiday season.

Winter was also a time for college student fun. Marymount's campus took on a magical appearance when covered with a blanket of snow. A select few students remember "borrowing" food trays from the cafeteria to sled down the hills and riverbanks around campus (followed by hot chocolate breaks). Some students even took turns ice-skating on nearby ponds at Salina Country Club.

The Annual Thespian Chr'1stmas Party, held at Dr. Dennis Denning's home, Jives on through rave reviews and stories from alumni. Colonel Norman Miller appeared each year as "the Real Santa Claus," while theater students participated in outrageous gag gift exchanges.

Marymount College embodied a unique spirit of kindness, not only at Christmas, but throughout its 67-year history. While the college closed in 1989, the spirit of Marymount lives on in the hearts and minds of nearly 7,000 graduates who have gone on to serve and to lead.

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