

A giftless Christmas

Last week, I read a newspaper article in the Standard that detailed the efforts of a group to create “a sane Christmas with a view of abolishing the indiscriminate giving of presents.” Members of the group called for a “giftless” Christmas. You may be familiar with similar efforts.

Yet, there was something special about the article I read. It appeared in the Nov. 22, 1912 edition of the Standard. A hundred years ago, people felt that Christmas had become too commercial, too secular and the true meaning of the holiday had been lost.

Today, those decrying the commercialization of Christmas point to a number of concerns.

The shopping frenzy begins while there are still leftovers from the Thanksgiving table. Many Christmas gifts serve no useful purpose. Christmas encourages some to spend more than they can afford. As I perused other archival editions of the 1912 Standard, I found that all of these elements of Christmas had firmly taken root in 1912.

The Thanksgiving edition of the Standard was filled with Christmas ads promoting sales that would begin the next day. In fact, because newspaper insertions had not yet come into use, the actual newspaper devoted a far greater portion of space to Christmas ads than you would find in current newspapers.

Although the term “Black Friday” was not part of the 1912 vocabulary, it was clear that the day after Thanksgiving was a huge shopping day. The Ogden department store W.H. Wright’s touted the “ultruistic” value of shopping early. “Then there is the greater reason for shopping early: the relief that it brings to the crowd of willing workers who must serve you.” Burt’s department store also encouraged shoppers to shop early in order to “receive the best attention.”

Just like today, the shoppers of 1912 were also informed that a lack of cash should not be a concern. Ogden’s National Outfitting Co. posed the question, “Why pay cash for your Christmas presents.” W.H. Wright’s announced: “Christmas shopping begins tomorrow: You make selections now and pay for them when you’re ready.”

Many of the popular gifts of 1912 were far from utilitarian. For women, furs coats, jewelry, silk, cut glass and face powders were popular Christmas gifts. A gift that was viewed as both luxurious and practical was phone service. The Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company advertised monthly phone service as a gift that would “lighten your wife’s work” and “open new social pleasures.”

The gifts for men raise some interesting questions regarding the temperance of

Ogden males in 1912. R.J. Reynolds Tobacco was promoted as the “gift that every man who smokes a pipe or rolls his own cigarettes will be grateful for. Thomas C. Foley advertised “sending the gift” of four full quarts of 100 proof whiskey for \$5, and they offered free delivery throughout the city. Ogden’s Becker’s

Brewing suggested that: “A consultation of eminent physicians would surely result in the recommendation of pure beer as a healthful, nourishing beverage.”

Interestingly, the children’s toys may reveal more about the era than the adult gifts. Reflecting the fact that an increasing number of Ogden homes had electricity, a Standard article titled “What Santa Claus Has in Store for 1912” suggested electric train sets

and toy electric stoves as gifts for children. One of the more interesting electric toys was a kinoscope that allowed children to show short movies in their home. The same article noted that because of the Balkan War, lead soldiers with the uniforms of Turks, Serbians, Greeks and Bulgarians were especially popular in 1912.

As I read through various editions of the 1912 Standard, I also noticed that the articles on the society pages detailed the lives of Ogden’s successful industrialists, financiers, and merchants. These were the people that Thorstein Veblen called captains of industry and finance, and Veblen would have described significant portion of their Christmas spending as “conspicuous consumption.” Indeed, Ogden’s “upper crust” did a great deal to foster the city’s vibrant retail trade.

At the same time, 1912 Ogden had its share of families at the other end of the income spectrum. Their Christmases were unlikely to be marked with gifts of furs and kinoscopes. The same is true today. On Black Friday, some Ogdenites will line up at Walmart, and others will line up at a social services agency to seek assistance.

Given the nation’s long history of consumerism, it is unrealistic to expect hordes of people to forgo their traditional Christmas shopping. On the other hand, those with the means to engage in conspicuous Christmas spending may wish to balance giving to family and friends with giving to strangers.

During the Christmas season, many organizations sponsor programs such as “Toys for Tots,” “Angel Tree” and “Sub for Santa.” Despite the fact that these programs are well publicized, in the final days of the Christmas season, you inevitably hear that the number of families needing help exceeded the donations received. It would be great if everyone with the wherewithal to have a gift-filled Christmas would redirect a little spending to the families in need. After all, the only families that should experience a “giftless” Christmas are those who intentionally want a “giftless” Christmas.

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

Commentary

Michael Vaughan is Weber State University’s provost. He accepts e-mail from readers at mvaughan@Weber.edu