





Traverse City Holiday Traditions Through The Years

By Ross Boissoneau | Nov. 28, 2021

From a downtown Santa house to shopping nights to a symphony concert playing Christmas favorites, Traverse City has more than its share of longstanding holiday traditions, some dating back 100 years.

Some traditions don't even really wait until the holiday season. This year's annual Festival of Trees, sponsored by the Zonta Club of Traverse City, took place Nov. 12-14, showcasing professionally decorated trees and a Yuletide Emporium, with profits supporting Zonta and nonprofit community partners. Zonta President Rhonda Estes says it has been in charge of the festival for the past 25 years, after taking over from the Traverse City Osteopathic Hospital Auxiliary.

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Coming up next, Downtown Ladies' Night and Men's Night will take place Dec. 9 and 16, respectively. The concept was introduced as Men's Night in 1949 (pictured). Back then, apparently it was assumed that men a) didn't know how to shop; b) didn't want to shop, and c) certainly couldn't wrap gifts. Women who "trespassed" during this men-only event were threatened with being "jailed" in the basement of Milliken's Department store. Santa would make his appearance coming down from the tea room.

If you find yourself downtown, you can always warm up with a cup of good cheer. Grandma Betsy's Hot Spiced Cider has been an ongoing treat for more than 40 years at the Captain's Quarters. "Golly, it started probably in the 70s," says Captain's Quarters owner Maurie Allen. His wife Grandma Betsy came up with the original recipe years ago. It's always available during business hours right beside the entrance to the men's clothing store.

"People look forward to it every year," says Allen. "It's outside, so people don't feel obligated to come in and say hi. But many do."

Traverse City historian Richard Fidler took a look back at area festivities of all sorts in his book *How the Good Times Rolled*. The hardscrabble existence of most people back in the day meant there was little time for celebration; 100 years ago, most workers put in ten-hour days and holidays were nearly non-existent. While Christmas was a given, Christmas trees were not: Not all households embraced the notion of decorating an evergreen in their homes.

But Traverse City did – and does. The downtown Christmas tree in the middle of Cass just south of Front Street has been a symbol of the season since at least the 1920s. Michelle Hunt, parks and recreation director for Traverse City, says the city puts out the word a couple months out, in hopes someone in or near the city will offer an evergreen for the city.

Team Elmer's donates the flatbed, truck and crane, and the city workers do the rest. "We cut it, load it, drive it across town, trim it, put it in the middle of Cass and decorate it," says Hunt. This year's was donated by a homeowner on West 11th Street. The blue spruce is 35 feet tall, has a 14-inch diameter and weighs 2,300 pounds.

It doesn't get much more traditional than *The Nutcracker*. Tchaikovsky's immortal ballet has become a seasonal attraction across the globe, and this area is no different. Interlochen Center Arts Academy Dance Division will showcase its production for five shows Dec. 9-12, accompanied by the Interlochen Arts Academy Orchestra.

Music, maestro? Many long-running musical traditions will return from the pandemic-induced hiatus. Interlochen's annual Sounds of the Season, with the Academy Wind Symphony and Choir, will take place Dec. 16 at Corson Auditorium. Old Town Playhouse traditionally hosts a holiday show, and this year's Holiday Cabaret takes place Dec. 16, 17 and 18. It is a Yuletide take on OTP's popular "Broadway Showstoppers," featuring members of the Young Company in a dance-filled musical revue.

The Traverse Symphony Orchestra's long-running "Home for the Holidays" is set for Dec. 18 and 19 at Corson Auditorium. "The TSO has been performing a holiday show for over 50 years," says Kedrick Merwin, the TSO's executive director. This year's show will feature what Merwin is calling a Victorian-style orchestra, comprised of string players along with a choir and organ. "When we were planning, we weren't sure we'd be able to have wind instruments. This will give it an old-time sound. I think it will be a nice touch." It will include traditional fare as well as a set of Brazilian holiday music for a quintet of cello, bass, drums, piano and flute.

If you want to join in the fun, the annual Messiah Sing will take place again this year at Central United Methodist Church. The tradition began in 1978, following a conversation between church organist Robert Murphy and Ken Jewell, who directed the chancel choir. It involves soloists, a small orchestra, choirs and community members as the chorus.

"It's like a reunion," says CUMC Music Director Jeffrey Cobb, noting it's not unusual for multiple generations of families to take part. "For most folks it feels like the start of the Christmas season." This year's event will take place Dec. 5.

As the years pass, so do some traditions. One that's no longer extant is the celebration of Santa Lucia. Lisa Johanssen oversaw the celebration, in which a young lady played the role of St. Lucy/Lucia. She would wear a white gown with a red sash and a crown of candles on her head and offer baked goods (traditionally saffron buns and ginger biscuits). It was followed by a concert featuring Johansen's flute students.

The venue changed over the years, from United Methodist Church to the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, with the concert then taking place at Kirkbride Hall. "It became a community event," said Johansen, noting that her husband Ingemar offered guidance, as the celebration is a Swedish tradition. The event lasted from 1986 to 2017, ending upon her retirement.

Another tradition missing this year is Santa's House. The downtown tradition began around the same time as the downtown Christmas tree, though it's moved around, from the open space on the sidewalk on the southwest corner of Front and Cass (now the home of Brasserie Amie) to State and Cass, with help from the owners of The Towne Plaza. Jean Derenzy, CEO of the Traverse City DDA, says it will return next year. In its stead, Santa will be visiting neighborhoods around downtown, and his mailbox will be at the State Theatre. Derenzy says both Santa's house and the downtown Christmas tree have been staples since the 1920s.

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