



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

December 2022



Northwest Corner of Coolidge & Twelve Mile—1950s

## Christmas in Berkley

by Don Callihan

### The Village's First Christmas

It was December of 1923, and Berkley was about to celebrate its first Christmas since its incorporation as a village in April of that year. As part of the celebration, Berkley's old newsboys were about to have their sale to raise money for the newly formed Berkley Goodfellows so that "no child (would go) without a Christmas." The newspaper they would be selling was a special edition of The Berkley Tribune dated December 14, 1923, that contained numerous stories, photos and retail ads relating to Berkley.

Berkley's churches were ramping up for Christmas celebrations and services. Members of The First Baptist Church of Berkley, on the corner of Monnier (now Coolidge) and Dorothea, were presenting their annual Christmas program featuring the children of the Sunday school followed by a play presented by The Ladies' Aid. The evening was to conclude with an appearance by Santa Claus.

Berkley's retailers were readying for Christmas shoppers. W. D. Holland (Holland Hardware) was advertising his Christmas stock at his store on the south side of Twelve Mile between Wakefield and Kipling. Grace's Grocery, on the corner of Monnier and Catalpa, had Christmas candies. Thomas Weston, at the corner of Monnier and Beverly, advertised his store as "Santa Claus' Headquarters" and stated that he carried "a complete line of toys, dolls and tree ornaments" as well as "a nice line of useful articles for presents," including, "fancy boudoir caps." J. Falzon, Dry Goods, Furnishings, and Shoes, on W. Twelve Mile (current location of the Yellow Door), advertised that "Falzon's means Christmas for man, woman and child."

The Berkley Theatre (aka Leone's Theatre) on the south side of Twelve Mile, just west of Robina, was promoting a silent film for Christmas Day; a comedy titled, *The Westbound Limited*. An added bonus was "One box of candy to every lady and a cigar for every man with Christmas greetings from the manager."

### The City's First Christmas

The next year of "Christmas Firsts" for Berkley was 1932, as that was the year that Berkley became a city. One event of note was a Christmas feather

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*In honor of the holiday season, during the months of November and December, the Museum will feature an exhibit on Christmas in Berkley. Pictures of the Santa that graces the northeast corner of 12-Mile & Coolidge, Christmas parades, the city's Nativity set and newspaper ads from Berkley stores will be on display*

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party at the Northwood Inn on Friday, December 16, sponsored by the Berkley Exchange Club. Why call it a feather party? It seems that the term arises from early fundraisers where the prizes consisted of something with feathers, i.e., turkeys, geese, ducks or chickens. There were no feathered prizes at this party; the emphasis was on raising money rather than giving out prizes. It was the early years of the Great Depression, and the proceeds were used to help Berkley's needy families.

On December 23, Our Lady of Refuge Church (forerunner to Our Lady of La Salette) had its Christmas Tree party in the Angell School Auditorium. Each attendee brought an ornament to put on the tree. The priest, Rev. John J. Callahan, made sure that Santa was there with candy, fruit and toys. The event was funded by a feather party held the night before.

Events of this type were typical for the years during the Great Depression and World War II. Similar events would continue, but, with the explosion in the birth rate at the end of the War, there was definitely an increased emphasis on toys, games and dolls for children, and who better to help fulfill that need than Santa Claus.

### Santa Comes to Berkley

While Santa had been visiting churches, schools and large department stores for many years, he began to appear at smaller stores as well. One of Berkley's first businesses to host Santa on a seasonal basis with regular hours was Masters on the east side of Coolidge, just north of Catalpa. Masters had everything that a drug store had, except a pharmacy. Their emphasis was on patent medicines, the soda fountain, magazines, toys and gifts. Masters became Santa's Berkley headquarters in 1946 and continued in that capacity until at least 1953.

While Masters remained Santa's headquarters, Berkley's Christmas shopping opportunities expanded dramatically in early 1949. New stores, anchored by SS Kresge—the forerunner of K-Mart which established the model for Walmart—opened on the north side of Twelve Mile, between Robina and Gardner. Berkley shoppers were ecstatic. For the first time, it was possible to do all of one's Christmas shopping without leaving the city. New "White-Way" streetlights on decorative steel lampposts had replaced the utility-pole-mounted lights between Wakefield and Tyler; Berkley's downtown actually looked like a downtown. Stores were open until 9 p.m. sidewalks were crowded with shoppers, and the soda fountain at Cunningham's Drug Store was serving up hot fudge sundaes and cherry Cokes to shoppers and their kids. Berkley was alive!

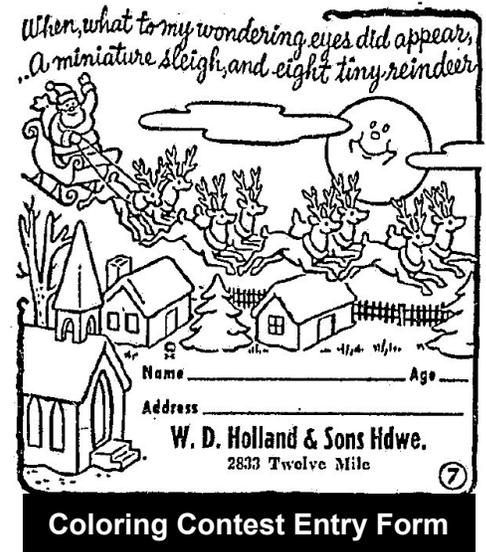
### Berkley's Santa Claus Figure

With business continuing to boom in the fall of 1951, Berkley's Santa Claus figure made its debut on the Coolidge median strip on the north side of Twelve Mile. Santa was back at this location for many years thereafter with his arm raised signaling a "Merry Christmas" to all who drove by. Then, on New Year's Eve 1960, a driver lost control of his vehicle, and Santa lost his head, literally. The exact circumstances of the incident have been lost to history, but a decapitation was not going to end Santa's reign. The city bought a new Santa from Bronner's in Frankenmuth in the spring of the following year at a cost of \$995, and Santa was back at Coolidge and Twelve Mile for the start of the 1961 Christmas season. He has been at that intersection every Christmas season since with the exception of a few years where he waved from the gazebo lot on the north side of City Hall.

### Santa by Air

1959 saw a gala welcome for Santa Claus as he began a ten-year tradition of arriving in Berkley by helicopter on the Friday after Thanksgiving. His landing location was the Coolidge median strip where he was greeted by the Berkley High School band. His elves made it known to the newspapers that he had switched to this aerial mode of transportation for pre-Christmas visits only so that he would not put too much wear and tear on Rudolf and the other reindeer

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### Coloring Contest

One Berkley tradition that began in 1948 and continued for many years thereafter was the Christmas Coloring Contest open to children ten years old and younger. Each participating Berkley merchant published a picture in the Berkley Advance for children to cut out and color. Each child dropped their completed entry into a box at the participating merchant's location where it would be judged, and a prize or prizes awarded. Multiple merchants published pictures so kids could participate in multiple contests and even win multiple prizes. There was no limit on the number of times each merchant's contest could be entered. A group picture of the winners was published in the Berkley Advance a week or so after the submission deadline. In 1954, there were 15 winners.

### Nylon Stockings

During the Christmas Season of 1945, the first since the end of World War II, two Berkley WWII veterans became Christmas heroes in the eyes of their respective girlfriends. Leslie A. Sapsford and Robert A. Wells braved masses of near-rioting women when they lined up at Montgomery Wards in Royal Oak to buy a pair of size 9 1/2 nylon stockings for each girlfriend. Nylons ceased to be available after November of 1941, when DuPont shifted all production of nylon to parachutes. In December of 1945, they were just beginning to reenter the market. We don't know how the girls reacted on Christmas day, but hopefully, 9 1/2 was their size.

## Christmas in Berkley - continued from page 2

to assure they would be in tip-top shape for their marathon mission on Christmas Eve. After arriving and then departing by helicopter, Santa came back in the evening for the Berkley Christmas tree lighting ceremony. Following the tree lighting, he was driven around the business district in a Berkley fire truck, tossing candy as he went.

Earlier in the day, some Berkleyites may have been present when Santa parachuted into Northwood Center (current site of Woodward Corners). It was not Santa's day. His leg was given a twist when it got caught in the shroud line of his bright red parachute as he descended. While trying to free his leg, a brisk breeze blew him off course and he landed four blocks from Northwood with his chute draped over a power line. Other than the relatively minor leg injury, he was unhurt. An automobile transported him to Northwood, and he greeted his admiring fans. There were no parachute attempts at Northwood in subsequent years.

### The Parade Years

As the 1960s progressed, the arrival of Santa by helicopter became passe'. The Berkley Department of Public Works (DPW) superintendent, Marvin M. Gensler, saw that no other city in the area had a Christmas parade and decided that it would be a great opportunity to bring people together, not only as parade viewers, but as parade participants and planners. He received backing from the Berkley City Council, and on December 6, 1969, Berkley had its first, regularly scheduled, Santa Claus Parade. The parade featured 40 floats, the Berkley High School marching band, the Detroit Edison Calliope, and at the end, Santa's float, with Santa, his sleigh, and six tiny reindeer. Six you say? That's right, six. Marvin and his DPW crew built the float and only had space for six reindeer. The kids were wise to this at the get-go and wondered, "Where are Donner, Blitzen and Rudolph?" Two years later, Gensler lengthened the float to 65 feet and included all the reindeer with Rudolph at the lead. The kids were happy and so was Gensler.



Original DPW-Built Santa Float After 2 Reindeer & Rudolph were added

The parade route went from LaSalette School, north on Coolidge to Twelve Mile, west on Twelve Mile, through the shopping district, to Bacon, and then south on Bacon to the Public Works Building. There, the kids met Santa in person and, of course, the jolly old elf asked each one what he or she wanted for Christmas and awarded each with the gift of a candy cane. The parade was so loved and successful that it has occurred every year since, with the exception of 2020, when it was cancelled because of Covid 19.

### Will the Parade Continue?

Although the parade has continued, there have been hic-cups along the way. Marvin Gensler, the originator of the parade, was having a difficult time doing his regular job while also trying to do parade organization. In 1974, the Berkley Jaycees came to his rescue and began taking over most of the planning and organizing. Gensler was still involved but did not shoulder the full responsibility. The Jaycees continued organizing the parade until they disbanded in 1975. Then it was the newly formed Berkley Men's Club who came to the rescue.

The Men's Club hosted the parade through 2004 and then realized in 2005 that they no longer had the resources to continue. It looked like the parade was lost, not only by the absence of an organizing group, but also by the lack of funding. The mayor at the time, John Mark Mooney, invited a group of Berkley's active residents to a rescue-the-parade meeting, and Cinda Coon, treasurer of the Berkley Junior Women's Club, agreed to co-chair a parade committee along with resident Paul Swayze.

Their first problem was money. They organized fundraisers and sought donations from residents and businesses but only raised about half of the money they needed. Then in mid-October, Royal Oak resident, Raymond Duffy, walked into City Hall and dropped off a check for \$5,000. He did so with no fanfare. Mayor Mooney said of Duffy, an 84-year-old Ford Motor Company retiree, "He just likes doing nice things for people." In recognition of his donation, the parade committee named Duffy the parade's grand marshal.

### A New Concept

Rather than the traditional daytime parade, the committee wanted something new and fresh. Their solution, a parade that begins at 5:30 p.m., which is dusk in December. Because of the near-darkness, floats and vehicles would be adorned with Christmas lights as would parade participants. The route would begin near Twelve Mile and Greenfield and end at City Hall where hot chocolate would be served and where the grand finale would be the tree lighting ceremony. It would be called the Holiday Lights Parade.

The first Holiday Lights parade was a smashing success. Everyone loved the lights and the tree-lighting ceremony. The event continues to this day and draws spectators from Berkley and the surrounding communities. Berkley's Christmas celebrations have come from feather parties to helicopter Santas to traditional parades to the Holiday Lights Parade we see this year which marks Berkley's 100th Christmas. What a great place to live!

# The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and our new Berkley Map prints

## Christmas Mugs and Ornaments

Come see our best-selling Berkley coffee mugs, with the Berkley Theatre mug being our most popular, along with a Christmas ornament featuring the Berkley Theatre. Stop in and pick yours up and be sure to check out the museum while you are here.. Christmas mugs and ornaments are \$10 each. Our larger nostalgic-restaurants-of-Berkley mug is \$15.

## Business Card-Sized Magnets

Just in, our new refrigerator magnets. \$1 each or all 6 for \$5. Available at the Museum, the City Hall and the Library



## Visit Us

**Berkley Historical Museum**  
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248-658-3335  
[museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net)

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM  
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at  
[www.berkleyhistory.org](http://www.berkleyhistory.org)

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

Instagram:  
[@berkleyhistoricalmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/berkleyhistoricalmuseum)

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## Get the Newsletter

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## Make a Donation

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: [museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net). Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

## Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to [museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net) indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

## Photo and Text Credits

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The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.