

A CHRISTMAS TEA

Victorian enthusiasts will enjoy this excerpt from *Taking Tea with Alice*.

BY DAWN HYLTON AND DIANE SEDO



Family Tea at holiday time is a wonderful practice to embrace and can be enjoyed when the hectic days of shopping are over and your family and friends have finally arrived. Beginning this new holiday tradition can be fun for the family, yet few know that the Victorians were

responsible for many of the customs we practice today.

In Victorian households, Christmas was more than just a holiday; it was a season of celebratory events. It began in late November on the first Sunday of Advent, when the Christmas pudding was mixed. Each family member would take a turn at beating the mixture, always stirring clockwise for good luck. After each took their turn, a ring, a coin and a silver thimble were tossed into the batter, which would then hang in a sack to mellow before being boiled in beef broth on Christmas Day. The person who bites into the ring will marry within the year; the coin brings wealth; and the thimble brings a happy, but single, life.

Traditions like this began in Victorian households, but probably the most significant contribution was to make Christmas a family affair. An entire month was spent preparing foods and decorations. Advent calendars were painstakingly made and began on the first

of December, counting down the days through December 24. Bible verses and Christmas carols such as "Silent Night" and "O Christmas Tree" were sung by Victorian families every Advent Sunday, when a red candle would be lit for each in the Advent wreath, suspended above them as they sang.

Queen Victoria herself single-handedly brought the full-size Christmas tree into vogue. Before her reign, Christmas trees were strictly a tabletop item, modestly decorated with handmade ornaments. This tradition abruptly changed as

her consort Prince Albert's German influence over Victoria began to flourish, and she adopted the custom of exhibiting a Christmas tree in the royal court. Once British loyal subjects saw the etching of their queen and her royal family gathered around a large, ornate Christmas tree, well-to-do families had trees standing ten feet or more. Decorated on Christmas Eve, the Victorian tree supported heavy blown-glass globes, fragile shapes adorned with metallic wire, and three-dimensional cone-shaped paper ornaments filled with sweets. Thirty candles for each foot of tree were lit



only twice during the holidays, on Christmas morning and New Year's Eve, for just twenty minutes at a time. Needless to say, a bucket filled with water with a long stick wrapped with a rag was never far from reach.

Many a Victorian tradition included a favorite Christmas carol, sung while a family member played the piano.

Taking Tea With Alice



Looking-Glass Tea Parties & Fanciful Victorian Teas

By Dawn Hylton & Diane Sedo

All things related to Christmas were popular with the Victorians. "The Night Before Christmas" was published in 1823, and is still read today as a Christmas Eve tradition. In the 1840s, in just six weeks, Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, his tale of Scrooge and how his lessons of Christmas Past, Present, and Future taught him the compassion that changed his life.

In the 1880s, Christmas cards became fashionable, the more ornate the better. Elaborate cards decorated with lace, tinsel, puffy satin centers, feathers, glitter, fold-outs, and pop-ups were sent out by the dozens.

Mistletoe was hung in every doorway, under which an unwary visitor was greeted with hugs and kisses. Parlor games provided an opportunity for Victorian children to have fun indoors, as this was the one time of the year that they could frolic in the parlor. They played Charades, enacting historical events that would amuse and entertain the family, sang Christmas carols, and enjoyed the sweets of the season.

The holidays were far from over once December 25th had passed. The ritual of the Yule log was a tradition everyone treasured: the largest log of wood a family member could find was decorated with sprigs of holly and then lit in the fireplace, in hopes that it would continue to burn throughout the twelve days of Christmas.

Boxing Day, which falls on December 26th, commemorates the Feast of Saint Stephen, the first

Below: In the Victorian era, children of wealthy families ate in the schoolroom or the nursery—not in the dining room with the adults. Lewis Carroll, however, enjoyed taking tea with Anne Clark Amor and her sisters, accompanied by their governess. The little girl later provided inspiration for his tales about Alice in *Wonderland*.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Taking Tea with Alice is written by Dawn Hylton and Diane Sedo, with photography by Kathryn Russell. Dawn is a freelance writer, passionate cook and homeschooling mom. Diane is an etiquette consultant, Victoriana collector and award-winning baker. She organizes creative theme parties and teas. Both authors live in Southern California.

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Christian martyr. To honor this day, employers gave their servants boxes of food and gifts to bring home to their families, and on this day, alms boxes are sent to the poor. Twelfth Night, January 6th, is the Feast of Epiphany, and symbolizes the day when the Three Kings arrived in Bethlehem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the Christ Child.

We owe many of our holiday traditions to the Victorians. The most important is the value of family participation in all we prepare for, in all we celebrate. At this special time of year, create memories for your children that they can someday pass down to

their own. It is remarkable that so many of the Christmas customs we enjoy today began more than one hundred years ago. It is up to all of us to carry on these rituals of our most important season. In remembering the old, we create the new. ❁

Editor's Note: The previous excerpt and photos from *Taking Tea with Alice* was used by permission of the authors, the photographer and the publisher.

Who could resist a buffet laden with Christmas cookies, cakes and pies? Surely not a Victorian lad, especially if he was waiting to open the gifts strewn beneath the tree. ❁