

A Lumber Baron And His Gift of Toys

New York Times

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Published: December 23, 1987

DANBY, Vt.— SILAS L. GRIFFITH, a 19th-century lumber baron, gave much to the town of Danby, including the municipal water system, the public library, the orphans' fund and money for the beautification of the Congregational church. But of all the gifts Mr. Griffith gave, none is so cherished as his Christmas tree.

The Silas Griffith Tree is what local people call the annual Christmas party financed by the interest on an account set up by S. L., as Griffith is still known, upon his death in 1903. The purpose of the party is to provide gifts to children between 2 and 12 from some parts of Danby - a town of about 1,100 south of Rutland, Vt. -and from the neighboring community of Mount Tabor, population 201.

In hard times, residents say, the gifts under S. L.'s tree were often the only ones they received. Even today, the gifts are an important contribution to Christmas in an area where the median annual family income is under \$14,000.

For the children, the party is a cause for anticipation and speculation. For the adults, it is time to relive Christmases past.

"The year a girl turned 6 was the year she received a doll," recalled Gloria White, 59, a retired teacher and a Mount Tabor native. "I remember that year, watching as the dolls were given out, one by one, and hoping I'd get one, and worrying that maybe they'd forgotten." She remembers her pure delight when a doll was placed in her arms.

Sharon Wescott still has the cedar box she received at age 7, 30 years ago. "I remember opening it up that first time and smelling that cedar," she said. "I thought that they made a mistake, that they wouldn't give anything this beautiful to such a young person." But there was no mistake, and the inside lid of the box still bears Mrs. Wescott's name and age, in youthful script.

On a below-freezing night in mid-December 1987, 88 youngsters and their parents walked through the snow to the white clapboard Congregational church to take part in the 84th party since Mr. Griffith's death. The children fidgeted through the carols and through the

Rev. Lester E. Tufts's short homily to S. L. and to his wife, Katherine Tiel Griffith, who added to the fund at her death in 1939.

All eyes were on the 88 unwrapped toys arranged on the altar and hanging on the boughs of a Christmas tree so tall that it scraped the tin ceiling of the sanctuary.

Beatrice Tifft, a small, dark-haired woman who is in charge of distributing the gifts, buys them each year with the interest from the \$5,000 trust left by the Griffiths. Griffith's will said that the children from certain sections of Danby - those where he drew most of the labor for his businesses - are eligible for gifts, along with all of those from Mount Tabor. Also in the will is the stipulation, Mrs. Tifft said, that each child receive a bag of candies and an orange.

"My dad always said that in the old days, the orange was even better than the present," said Edward Griffith - a distant relative of the lumber baron, and one of the few left in town - who attended the party with his daughter Dulcie.

Ann Rothman, who had vacationed in Danby for years before moving here to research a book she is writing on Griffith, described her subject as a shrewd, unscrupulous businessman who was a Scrooge with wages but a Santa Claus when it came to giving to the town. Self-taught and self-made, he had an ear for good music and an eye for attractive women, she said.

Danby residents appear to accept that S. L.'s halo may be tarnished in spots. Mrs. Wescott, for example, said her great-grandfather worked only briefly for Griffith because "he didn't want Silas to own him, like he owned everyone else in town."

But, she added, "It all kind of comes out in the wash, the good and the bad that he did."

What is generally known about Griffith is that he was the son of a poor farmer and that he showed an aptitude for business. Financed by a rich uncle, he ran a local store. He eventually owned thousands of acres of prime timberland, several mill villages, worker housing and factories.

Ms. Rothman said he was a staunch Republican who won a seat in the State Senate. His first wife divorced him; his second survived him. On his death certificate, his occupation was listed as "capitalist."

No one is certain what prompted Griffith and his widow to leave money for the Christmas party.

"Maybe he just liked kids," said 10-year-old Steven Ricketts, who arrived at the church nearly an hour before the party to view the presents. "Or maybe he just really, really liked toys."

photos of children opening Christmas presents (NYT/Paul O. Boisvert)