

A Sun House Christmas

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It is surprising how many Ukiahans have never taken the tour of one of the county's most treasured historic sites: the 1911 Sun House home belonging Grace and John Hudson.

The holiday season is an excellent time to visit the home and museum, as the Hudson house is decorated for the holidays and ready to receive visitors.

The tradition started about 15 years ago, according to Karen Holmes, museum registrar and Carpenter family historian.

"I started working at the museum on a project in 1995. Our current director, Sherri Smith-Ferri was also here, working on her thesis. Within a year, Sheri had become museum director, and it was her idea to begin the tradition of Christmas decorating and having a holiday open house," Holmes explains.

"When we first started the project, we had a lot of help from the Sun House Guild. We used contemporary decorations like anyone would have in their homes today. As years went on, we decided that the decorations should match the time period and the house," Holmes continues. She began to research how homes were decorated during the time of Grace Hudson's life. She found a 1910 Ladies Home Journal featuring a Craftsman-style home, very similar to the Hudson's home which was designed by architect George Wilcox.

The classic Arts and Crafts home is festooned with bay laurel swags, donated to the museum by McFadden Farms. Pine sprays, pinecones and other floral motifs fill the house, and in the Hudson's formal dining room, the holiday table is set with a traditional Christmas meal.

In the front living area, a Christmas tree has been installed. "The holiday tree is the latest innovation for us. Our store manager did research on how trees were decorated. During the Victorian Era, trees were decorated with fruit, flowers and gilded nuts. We used dried hydrangeas and placed them on the tree. Candles were placed on the branches," notes Holmes.

The typical Craftsman home was a reaction to the Victorian decorating style- using more native materials. Below the tree, presents are displayed, but the wrapping differs significantly from the colorful motifs used today. "We did research on how presents were wrapped. White paper with colored ribbons was used."

The museum staff does most of the decorating, with support from Sun House Guild members and the Board of Directors. "We do it all in about three days time in preparation for our Open House which was held on the first Saturday in December," says Holmes.

The museum has no written records of how the family decorated or celebrated the holidays.

"We can only learn about the Hudson's life from things they left behind- manuscripts, letters and oral histories. We've not found anything specific to Christmas, except for the fact that A.O. Hudson and Helen Carpenter, Grace's parents- were married on Christmas day and had an annual holiday party on December 26. I think that Christmas wasn't celebrated at the time they married. Christmas became more popular with Queen Victoria." The Queen's marriage to German Prince Albert brought many new traditions to Great Britain, so the installation of holiday trees and caroling came after that time. When Helen and A.O. were living on the Kansas frontier, life was rough. I doubt if there was a lot of family celebration at that time," says Holmes.

"We think the family moved into this home around 1912. After that, they probably did celebrate a little more. John and Grace had no children. When they moved in, Grace's parents were still alive and there were other relatives in Potter Valley. It was harder to get around at that time, and I'm not sure when John Hudson got a car, so our contemporary associations of a big family Christmas probably don't apply to their time."

At the dining table, since Grace's background was Welsh, English and Scottish, the foods on display include British-style goose, plum pudding and vegetables. The replica foods were procured from England. The Limoges china on display belonged to Grace Hudson. "The glasses on the table were donated last year and the silverware was donated by the Saturday Afternoon Club two years ago," says Holmes. The oversized, impressive chairs belonged to Grace. "The chairs were English. We have a diary entry from Grace stating her carved chairs had arrived. She got them in the 30's. Grace was a lover of antiques and sometimes traded her artwork for antique items," Holmes continues.

The Hudson's were bohemian, and they traveled extensively. Grace lived for a year in Hawaii, and John's family was from Nashville, where there were certainly holiday traditions. But because of their exposure to a broad range of cultural mores, it is difficult to imagine how they celebrated the holidays. "John escaped from Nashville, so we don't know if he would have carried those traditions with him. Grace was so creative from birth, I'm sure she would have decorated her home. She was making outfits for her paper dolls when she was five, and took people up to her gravesite before she died, where she had installed stone benches and a quail pond."

A cookbook dating from 1890 was created by friends and family and given to the Hudson's for their wedding. The book's cover was painted by Grace and includes a holiday recipe for Plum Pudding created by Mrs. Carl Purdy which could be replicated today.

Holmes notes that the museum is interested in helping with tours of the Sun House. "If you love history and would like to give tours, we are always looking for volunteer docents and store managers. It's a great way to get involved in your community, and next year you can help decorate the house," she smiles.

The decorations will be on display until mid-January. Docent-led tours of the Sun House are held Wednesday through Sunday from noon until 3 p.m. The museum will be closed Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

For more information visit <http://www.gracehudsonmuseum.org> or phone (707) 467-2836.