

CHRISTMAS IN IONIA FIFTY YEARS AGO
BY P. H. TAYLOR

Meeting Hon. S. A. Yeomans one day last week, I asked him to tell me about their first Christmas. He laughed heartily at my request, then said: "You know the interior of my father's house, and are able to give a wordy picture. You may tell how we ground our corn, and, I think, some friendly Indian gave us a saddle of venison, which was prepared for our dinner that day." First about the corn. This colony arrived at the end of their journey May 28, -1833. The corn which had been planted by the Indians was purchased by the new comers. When fully ripe the corn was taken care of. Now comes the necessity to grind it. Each family having corn had a tree felled near the house. The stump was hollowed out on the top by the use of the ax and fire so as to make something like a mortar. Into this cavity the corn was placed and then broken by means of a pestle. When broken the corn was taken to the house of Samuel Dexter, where it was ground in a large coffee mill. This was done after the day's work was finished. Mr. Yeomans says he would go with his father to help grind the corn; one turn, then the other, for half or two-thirds of a pailful every night.

Now for the Christmas. Fifty years ago there were no stores or shops where presents could be bought, so something must be gotten up out of material in the house. This house of Erastus Yeomans was a very commodious log house, standing a few rods west of the frame house, doors on each side (the latch string was always out), a large stoop on the south side. In the west end of this house was an old-fashioned open fireplace; the stick chimney was large enough for Santa Claus to drive his reindeers and sleigh into. These pioneers coming from the east brought some of their eastern notions with them, and one was to keep Christmas. In order to have something for each little stocking, Aunt Phebe must sit up after the children had gone to bed, and sometimes they would be urged to retire earlier than they desired to. When fairly out of sight the Christmas work was brought out, and by late bedtime Christmas eve something was placed in each stocking. I will only guess what it was: For the youngest, a pair of red mittens specked with white with a braided string of red and white. Now for the dinner: The fireplace was large enough to take a quarter of a cord of four feet wood if necessary; from one side of the chimney to the other a stout pole was placed on which to hang the long pothooks and trammels. While the kettles were boiling over the fire, the saddle of venison was suspended from the beam above by a stout cord in front, and as it was cooked on one side, it was turned around so that each part was most thoroughly done. A large pan was on the hearth to catch the drippings, and the old-fashioned, long-handled frying-pan was brought into use to bake the short-cake. So Christmas fifty years ago was "A Merry Christmas" to each one as they came in sight-a pair of mittens to the smaller children, and a dinner good enough for the president.

Ionia, December 24, 1883