Old Christmas in a Tudor Manse

By Julie Frey | Photographs by Winfield Ross

Stan Hywet, a Tudor Revival mansion in Akron, Ohio, brings the spirit of Old Christmas to life each year during its “Deck the Hall” celebration.

A 25-foot Christmas tree stretches nearly three stories to fill Stan Hywet’s Great Hall. The Selberling family meticulously designed the living room in the Tudor style and adorned it with a tree of similar size each Christmas between 1915 and 1940. The open doorway offers another glimpse of one of many themed trees decorated at Christmastime.
LESS THAN A LIFETIME after the last Tudor ruled England, a Puritan revolution bleached out the colorful interiors and ritual of the state church—and with the gold and stained glass, out went Christmas pageantry. In came the serious sermons that yawned through the holiday in the motherland and her American colonies as well.

Despite the Puritans' best efforts, the ancient Christmas traditions and spirit would not die—especially in America. Washington Irving rediscovered it as "Old Christmas" in his Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, and when he moved in just before Christmas, F.A. Seiberling instilled the same spirit of the holiday at Stan Hywet, his Tudor Revival mansion outside Akron.

Irving might have had a place much like Stan Hywet in mind when he wrote, "Everything conspired to produce kind and happy feelings in this stronghold of old-fashioned hospitality." A visit at Christmastime reveals delightful (and intentional) parallels between the Old Christmas celebrations of Irving and Seiberling.

Though completed in 1915 from a fortune made founding the Good-year Tire and Rubber Company, the mansion-now-museum Stan Hywet distills the essence of Tudor architecture and sensibilities in its 65 rooms, 64,500 square feet, and across the once 3,000-acre estate. Seiberling meant his mansion to be more than

A lavishly decorated Christmas tree brightens a corner of the Dining Room, the dark reds and golds of the ornaments complimenting the room's rich woodwork and painted frieze.
just for himself, more than just for his family. It was built as a monument for all to enjoy, with the words Non Nobis Solum—"not for us alone"—carved into the manor’s crest.

At no time of year does that adage hold true more than at Christmastime. Patriarch Frank Seiberling, known as F.A., understood the meaning of Christmas and the proper way to celebrate.

In Old Christmas, Irving is introduced to the celebration of the old holiday at a grand manse owned by the Bracebridge family by a member coincidentally named Frank. “My father, you must know, is a bigoted devotee of the old school, and prides himself upon keeping up something of old English hospitality,” Irving has Frank Bracebridge remember. “He even regrets sometimes that he had not been born a few centuries earlier, when England was itself, and had its peculiar manners and customs.”

A wreath decorated with nuts, twigs, and berries hangs in the Dining Room. Traditionally, Mrs. Seiberling decorated the house using fresh greenery, pinecones, and other natural materials, spreading them along fireplace mantels throughout the house.

The spacious Dining Room—its table, mantel, and windows festooned with centerpieces and swags—hosted many of the Seiberling family’s Christmas celebrations. The frieze around the top of the room, painted by New York artist Robert Sewell, depicts characters from The Canterbury Tales.
The Selberlings purchased the woodwork for the Master Bedroom from an unidentified manor home in England that was being torn down in 1912 as the couple was completing a tour of the English countryside. Interior decorator Hugo Huber retrofit the woodwork into the room. The Christmas tree, decorated with Victorian-style paper ornaments and beads, lends vintage charm to the space.
To the Seiberlings, family always came first. Attendance at Christmas, while not mandatory, was heartily encouraged, and F.A. would often pay train fares and expenses to ensure that his children and other family could attend the yearly festivities.

Seiberling knew the joys of bringing together a large family—he was one of nine siblings. Over the forty years that the Seiberlings hosted Christmas Day at the mansion, they often entertained more than eighty friends and family members.

“The family meeting was warm and affectionate,” noted Irving’s protagonist. For him, the old holiday united a disparate family as well. “It was composed of different branches of a numerous family connection, where there were the usual proportion of old uncles and aunts, comfortably married dames, supernumerated spinsters, blooming country cousins, half-fledged striplings, and bright-eyed boarding-school hoydens.”

Fitting the entire Seiberling clan in the manor’s immense dining room for Christmas lunch took imagination and a pi-shaped table bedecked with the most splendid china and arrangements. The meal, of course, was sumptuous.

“Supper was announced shortly after our arrival. It was served up in a spacious oaken chamber,” wrote Irving about Old Christmas at Bracebridge Hall. “The table was abundantly spread with substantial fare; but the Squire made his supper of frumenty, a dish made of wheat cakes boiled in milk with rich spices, being a standing dish in old times for Christmas Eve.”

Perhaps fearing that Santa might not choose the right chimney leading to the family festivities from the home’s twelve (venting twenty-three hearths), the Seiberlings supplied their own jolly elf—a family member would don the red-and-white Santa Claus suit and hand out gifts to the children. But this family Santa required each child to perform a “trick” before receiving his or her gift. The children could sing a song, play an instrument, recite a poem, or perform a trick to entertain St. Nick and the whole gathering.

“My father was always scrupulous in exacting our holidays, and having us around him on family festivals,” noted Frank Bracebridge in Old Christmas. “He used to direct and superintend our games with the strictness that some parents do the studies of their children. He was very particular that we should play the old English games according to their original form; and consulted old books for precedent and authority for every ‘merrie disport,’ yet I assure you there never was pedantry so delightful.”

After Christmas lunch, entertainment continued in Stan Hywet’s two-storey Music Room, where the
This oak cabinet, carved with "1671" at the top, is one of the oldest antiques in the house. The Seiberlings purchased it while traveling in England in 1915.

Children would often act in a play, such as Dickens’ Christmas Carol.

In Old Christmas, entertainment was a similar low-key affair. "An old harper was summoned from the servants' hall, where he had been strumming all the evening, and to all appearance comforting himself with some of the Squire's home-brewed."

Although the Seiberlings no longer celebrate at Stan Hywet—they gave the estate to the Akron community in 1957—today Stan Hywet continues the old Christmas traditions as taught by the Seiberlings, holding an annual celebration fittingly called "Deck the Hall."

Each year you are invited to join in the celebration after the staff transforms the manor house and grounds into a different Christmas wonderland. It becomes a chance to bring family and friends to celebrate in the style of Old Christmas, visiting more than twenty rooms with sixty Christmas trees ranging from 3 to 25 feet tall and dazzling you with 850,000 lights, both inside and out.

Irving regretted the disappearance of Old Christmas, writing, "It is much to be regretted that the custom is fallen into neglect," but he would be happy to see its revival at Stan Hywet Hall. *

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This year's Deck the Hall event focuses on the theme "Postcards from the Past." The hall is open for tours from 5 to 8 p.m. November 24-25, November 30, and December 1-2, 7-23, and 26-30. Visitors can tour indoors and outdoors at their leisure. Only the first floor of the Manor House is wheelchair accessible. Outdoor heaters are provided in viewing and waiting areas when the temperature is below freezing, but the event is rarely cancelled for inclement weather. Strollers and food and beverages are allowed on the grounds and in the Corbin Conservatory but not in the Manor House.

Green silk damask fabric covering the Library walls bring out the ornate carving of the black walnut mantel, decorated with a simple garland and Christmas balls.