

A Short History of Caroling

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Caroling is my favorite simultaneously emergent and residual cultural phenomenon, and for a folklorist, that's saying a lot! Caroling is a contemporary version of one of the most ancient traditions of the winter solstice, the house visit performance. It's a fabulous illustration of how traditions constantly change, adapt, and emerge as new generations of people make them their own. That, and it's just great *fun* to be out in the cold and the dark singing old, familiar songs with other happy people, each encounter at every doorway unique and unrepeatable.

For me, it's also the feeling of participating in an activity that people have practiced, in one way or another, for hundreds if not thousands of years. So where does caroling as we know it come from?

Contemporary caroling has several predecessors. From ancient Roman times up into the 18th century, celebrations of the winter solstice and, later, Christmas, emphasized social inversion, and often involved house-to-house visiting. Two main types of house visits were wassailing and mumming.

Wassailing was a form of ritualized social inversion that began in the middle ages. Male peasants would go to the home of their feudal lord and sing songs demanding that he give them some portion of the best of his stock—beer, spirits, and cakes. He would do so and, in exchange, the peasants would give him their “good will,” which in feudal times was no small matter. This practice continued after feudalism, with poorer folks visiting wealthy homes. We still sing some of the “good will” parts of wassailing songs today, leaving out the verses that threaten physical harm if demands are not answered.

Another group of traditions involved disguised visitors entering homes to perform a short play, make music or mischief, dance, or require the hosts to guess their identities, depending on the local tradition. Collectively, these traditions are called “mumming.” Mumming almost always involved a “payment” of goods for the entertainment—food, alcohol, or money. Unlike wassailing, it was not always practiced along class lines. Mumming is still practiced in a few places in Europe.

Another caroling ancestor is found in the Christmas Waits. In medieval England, waits were official town musicians who played on civic occasions and doubled as night watchmen. When the waits were abolished in 1835, amateur groups sprung up to replace them at Christmastime. They played and sang house-to-house for tips, becoming known as the Christmas Waits.

The United States came to have its own mixture of house visit customs, as immigrants brought their traditions with them and these melded with others. Even in Puritan New England, where Christmas was banned because of its rowdy character, there are accounts of illegal wassailing. Through the 19th century, both urban and rural house visit customs were usually disorderly, often scary. In large cities like Philadelphia and New York, drunken bands of men and boys would take to the streets at night, noise-making, shooting rifles, making “rough music,” and even destroying property as they went among the wealthy urban homes. Upper class Victorian-era citizens took on the project of taming Christmas.

Victorians domesticated the holiday, focused it on children, and created organized charity in an attempt to allay direct begging. As they worked to suppress rowdy wassailing, they promoted carol-singing at home, in church, and on town greens. They re-imagined feudal Christmases as celebrations of class harmony, when happy peasants serenaded their generous masters with songs of goodwill. They depicted this image in their writing and on Christmas cards, and even set about collecting folk carols and writing new carols in a self-consciously medieval style. “Good King Wenceslas” and “Deck the Halls,” for example, were both written in the mid-19th century, despite their medieval themes.

In turn-of-the-century Boston, a man who had experienced the charm of the Christmas Waits in England began the custom of outdoor caroling in that city. Organizations such as the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music promoted outdoor caroling in the 1910s and '20s. By the middle of this century, caroling had become what we think of today, with neighbors visiting one another's homes, as well as hospitals and nursing homes, in a more or less orderly fashion.

In my research into contemporary caroling, I found as many different ways of carrying out the tradition as the people I interviewed. In part, this is because there are so many different ideas about past caroling traditions to choose from as inspiration—some like the idea of the rowdy mob; others think of caroling as quaint and quiet. However, the carolers I spoke with had very similar reasons for caroling. For almost all of them, caroling is about creating community, in response to perceived problems with community. They mentioned separation of generations, an overly commercialized Christmas, an overly commodified approach to music, and a general lack of a “sense of community” as societal problems they hoped to challenge in some small way through the act of caroling.

Though caroling has emerged out of many past customs, its motivations are very different—rather than making visits in order to demand or receive goods, people envision caroling as a gift they give to their listeners. In this way, caroling is as “emergent” and changing as it is “residual” of ancient traditions.

Do you carol? What are your motivations or fondest memories? Contact me by calling TAUNY or emailing hannah@tauny.org. I'd love to hear your story! And if you can't join us for caroling around Canton, think about gathering some friends and family and striking out on your own. You'll be part of an ancient but ever changing practice, and you just might get some hot chocolate or figgy pudding out of the deal.

