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Travel Scene

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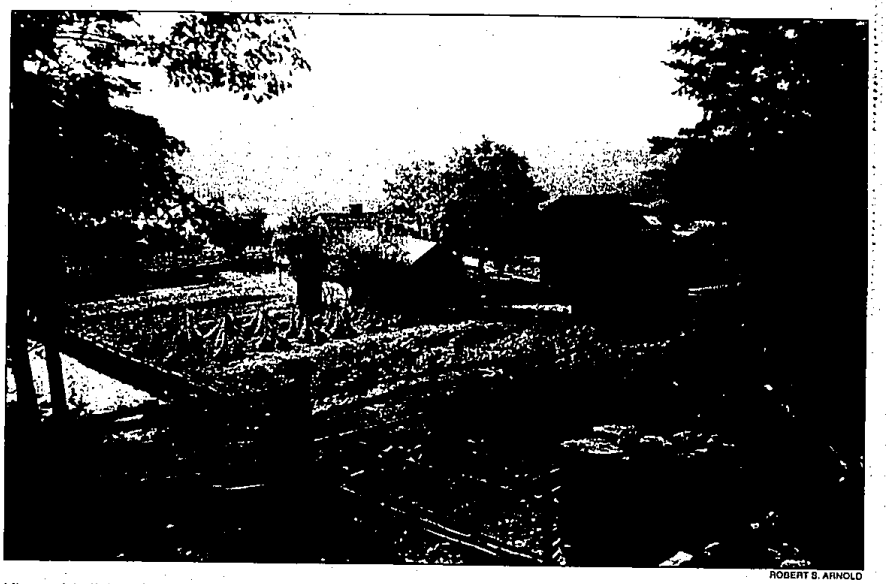
A costumed "intrepretor" tends the tulip garden at the Towne House at Old Sturbridge Village.



ROBERT S. ARNOLD

Like a misty tintype from the past, the Freemont Farm at Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Mass., offers a quaint view of a lifestyle that has long since vanished.

An 1830s-style holiday

Sturbridge seasons Thanksgiving with old spices

By Sally Sawyer
staff writer

It is Thanksgiving season at Old Sturbridge Village, an outdoor living history museum reminiscent of Greenfield Village, New England style. The autumn sun warms the chilly rain-drenched earth. Trees arch across narrow village streets. Gold and yellow leaves drift silently down.

BUZ SAWYER

Face from the past: A farmer wears a traditional high straw hat to keep cool while working outdoors

They only "speak" 19th century here, so if you ask a costumed "resident" where he was born, he will say "why I was born right here in the village in 1822." Ask Isaiah Thomas for example. No, he doesn't play basketball, he was a rebel printer always one step ahead of the British troops during the American Revolution.

Everything smells freshly washed. Blue jays caw and nuthatches walk comically head-first down trees, chattering over a harvest of worms. It is mid-morning, the best time for a quiet stroll through the rural life of the 1830s as it is shown today in Old Sturbridge Village, an hour's drive west of Boston in the town of Sturbridge, Mass.

The Village opened in 1946, the combined effort of Albert B. and Joel Cheney Wells, executives at the American Optical Company in Southbridge, Mass. It developed as an overflow of a Wells Family Museum started in the early 20th century. As more antiques were collected, the idea of displaying them in a year-round setting evolved.

Today you find 400 accurately costumed interpreters on the staff, who know first-hand about the physical discomforts of being too warmly clothed in summer and not dressed warmly enough for the severe New England winter.

"Sometimes I drop a couple of petticoats when it's hot," an elderly resident said. "I'll bet the women did that back in 1830 too!"

Streets are still unpaved, in keeping with the 1830s atmosphere, so the mire is thick under our boots. The Center Common grasses are unevenly "mowed" by close-cropping sheep.

This is living history, so everyone dresses, acts and speaks as if they were the 19th century residents of the Freeman Farm. The livestock has been fed, the eggs gathered and gardens tended.

Pliny Freeman must have gotten up at dawn to stoke the fire with wood gathered by his sons. Now logs in the huge ever-present fireplace glow and cast dancing shadows. Females of all ages stand around the large table preparing the Thanksgiving feast.

Meredith, a 3 year old, adds her expertise as taste tester. Imported spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg and tea have been bartered for fresh eggs, butter, cheese and wool.

Delia Freeman has added only a clock and wallpaper to the possessions she and her husband owned when they were married. Farmers chose to invest in land and livestock rather than domestic comforts, like carpets and curtains, favored by village residents. A "middling" farm family owned 70-80 acres of fenced orchards, livestock and land growing field and kitchen produce.

A farmer sickle-cut hay while his apprentice tied the bundles, each wearing straw headgear reminiscent of Abe Lincoln's stovepipe hat.

"Why are your hats so high?"

"Cooler that way," he said.

Everything is stored in cool root cellars and barns from one harvest to the next. At noon, before the main meal of the day, Pliny Freeman gives thanks for a successful year and for being able to raise seven children.

We walk back to the center of the village past the district school and town pound to Asa Knight's Dry Goods Store. The shelves are stocked with fine fabric, shoes, tobacco, writing tablets and coffee. In the back are common items like molasses, vinegar, rum, brooms, shovels and clothes pegs.

Patent medicines are readily available. Most popular is Moore's Essence of Life. It was what most women took when they weren't quite sure what ailed them. It didn't seem to cure them, but it certainly made them feel better. It was 80% alcohol!

Advice books are also popular. The Mother's Book and many cookbooks are for sale.

I found Laurie Smith of Michigan explaining that a woman's bonnet was a "platform for fashion." Laurie was born in Ann Arbor, attended Central Michigan University, did summer work at Mackinac Island and is now "head interpreter for textiles" at Old Sturbridge Village.

Thanksgiving service is held at the Center Meeting house at 1 and 3 p.m. Visitors sit in pews with high sides to keep out the cold. Some "residents" bring blankets and mini-foot warmers from home. Ecumenism was unheard of in 1830 so small religious groups met in homes, or places like the Richardson Parsonage, a few steps from the meeting house.

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After the service we head hungrily toward Bullard Tavern, following the fragrance of spices wafting from pumpkin, mince and apple pies. You can eat oyster bisque, cornbread, relishes and salad anytime, but a popular feast is prepared in the Publick House, Sturbridge, and served during several seatings on Thanksgiving Day.

Make dinner reservations a year in advance if you can, or hope to be lucky enough to find a cancellation. You should also start saving your pennies. Thanksgiving dinner costs $50 per adult, $35 for youths 6-15, $22 for children two to five, infants can share your dinner free. That price includes admission to the village, all the facilities and activities, and allows you to return the following day.

You will recognize Bullard Tavern by its sign, created by Village curators to look as it would have looked six generations ago in

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Toldeo Zoo animals bask in a holiday evening glow

By By Iris Sanderson Jones
staff writer

"And God said, 'Let there be light,'" a voice said in the darkness.

And there was.

No, we were not walking through the first book of Genesis, we were walking into the Toledo Zoo. It was full of lights. Lights on the trees. Lights on the buildings. Lights shining on the animals . . .

Lights on the animals?

"There's a giraffe!"

"Hey look at the polar bear!"

"How did they get the animals to stand still so long?" a tiny voice asked.

"And how did they plug them in?"

They didn't plug them in, of course. This is "The Lights Before Christmas," a holiday celebration of lights that is in its fourth year at the Toledo Zoo. You might say it is one of yuletide's most electrifying attractions.

The attraction begins Nov. 30 and runs daily except Dec. 24, 25, 31 and Jan. 1, 1991. Lights are on from 5 p.m. until zoo closing at 9 p.m. Admission is $2 for adults, $1 for children 2-11 and for seniors.

WHY DOES it seem so appropriate to see lights against a dark winter sky during the Christmas season? A question like that makes me want to rush to the encyclopedia and look up the word "light."

Light is the sensory impression made on the eye. Newton discovered the spectrum while playing with soap bubbles. There was the Nicol Prism and the Fraunhofer Diffraction Phenomena and the Atomic Theory of Refraction, but none if it explained Christmas lights.

crossroads

Iris Jones

So I looked up Christmas.

"In the beginning many of the earth's inhabitants were sun worshipers because the course of their lives depended on its yearly round in the heaven, and feasts were held to aid its return from distant wanderings."

And that's where I learned, on page 643 of my ancient Encylopedia Britannica, that just past mid-December is the winter solstice, a critical time in northern lands. It is the point when the shortening days of fall and winter begin to grow longer again. Ancient people held feasts in celebration of the lengthening days. . "They built great bonfires in order to give the winter sun god strength and to bring him back to life again . . . Thus the central idea of the winter solstice — the return of light — became the hope of the world . . .'

Any northerner knows that feeling.

Nobody is sure about the exact date of Christ's birth, but "when the fathers of the church in A.D. 440 decided upon a date to celebrate the event, they wisely chose the day of the winter solstice, which was firmly fixed in the minds of the people and was their most important festival."

They lit bonfires. Later the Romans decorated homes and temples with green boughs and flowers. The Druids collected mistletoe to hang in their homes. The Saxons used holly. The Germans introduced the Christmas tree. The pioneers brought it to America and we decorated it with lights in accordance with the ancient custom of celebrating winter with lights.

It is an easy jump from there to the sight of zoo animals outlined in lights against a darkening winter sky.

This may be more than you care to know about lights.

But when you travel from one lighted festival to another this holiday season, think about those pagans of long ago who lit up the world to bring the sun god back to life.

If you won the lottery, you could watch them turn the lights on for Christmas at the Ritz in London or watch them light the candles on the Christmas trees in Germany.

But it might be less expensive and more practical to celebrate in the Grand Traverse area, where the Grand Traverse Resort threw the switch on 175,000 shimmering lights Nov. 16 to launch the Northwoods Festival of Lights.

You could tour Connor Prairie, Ind., by candlelight, strolling down candelit paths through the restored 1836 village near Indianapolis anytime after Dec. 8. Admission is $7.50 adults, $4.50 children 6 to 12.

There are a thousand points of light during the yuletide. Take the time to seek some out.