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Delving Into Diaries of the Past

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Delving Into Diaries of the Past

Abstract

January of 1856 was blustery and cold, but John T. McIlhenny had enough work to keep him warm. The 19-year-old typesetter dropped letter after letter into the frames to create the week's news. The Star and Banner office along Chambersburg Street was always a busy place. Beside the weekly issues of the paper, McIlhenny and his coworkers were job printers, making sure Gettysburg was plastered with broadsides, ads and published sermons galore. Outside the window, McIlhenny told his diary, those first few weeks of January had, "been extremely cold - exceeding anything we have had for many long years." The mercury had been plummeting. "The coldest day we have had the thermometer stood 16 1/2 degrees below zero!" (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Gettysburg, Adams County, John T. McIlhenny, cold weather, sleigh ride, diary

Disciplines

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Comments

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Delving into diaries of the past

January of 1856 was blustery and cold, but John T. McIlhenny had enough work to keep him warm. The 19-year-old typesetter dropped letter after letter into the frames to create the week's news. The Star and Banner office along Chambersburg Street was always a busy place. Beside the weekly issues of the paper, McIlhenny and his coworkers were job printers, making sure Gettysburg was plastered with broadsides, ads and published sermons galore.

Outside the window, McIlhenny told his diary, those first few weeks of January had, "been extremely cold – exceeding anything we have had for many long years." The mercury had been plummeting. "The coldest day we have had, the thermometer stood 16 ½ degrees below zero!"

But there was more that January keeping McIlhenny warm than just his work. When he wasn't in the office, McIlhenny was cavorting like any self-respecting teenager. On New Year's Day, McIlhenny rented a one horse sleigh and toured the streets of the borough. "Coming up Chambersburg Street past Mr. McCreary's," the would-be lothario boasted to his diary, "about a half dozen females stuck their heads to the window and beckoned me to stop and give them a ride." In a flash, Lizzie and Agnes McCreary were sitting in the sleigh. But it seated only two. The teenager relished sitting on the laps of both young women, then riding with the two out of town.

"When a person gets a taste of the good thing," McIlhenny smiled at his diary, "their appetite naturally craves more." When a friend a few days later mentioned another sleighing outing, the teen knew just what he had to do. "I worked most

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

*John M.
Rudy*



awful hard on Thursday all day to gain time to go, and still was mighty near not getting off." But still he made it, again plunging into the snow with a local Gettysburg woman.

Again and again, McIlhenny took young woman after young woman out into the chilly January air, bundled together under blankets in the rented sleighs. He admitted to his diary, without even an air of remorse, that when it came to women, "there were so many I couldn't begin to get around," in spite of how hard he tried. He was, after all, "pretty extensively acquainted among the female population," of the county.

One sleighing trip, taken with his church choir, was the pinnacle though. Along with three other young men and their courting partners, the sleigh went darting off down the Fairfield Road. "Professor Fogg," the choir's director, had, "a singing class in Fairfield, also, and we thought would pay them a friendly visit and see how they were progressing." It was a useful ruse for an hour in a sleigh cuddling in the cold.

"The ringing of the 'merry bells,' the crack of the driver's whip, the mischievous looks in the eyes of the ladies, and the 'war of wit' that was kept up made the

enjoyment indescribable." Out to Fairfield the group went. Singing and dinner went by quick, and then time came for the trip back home. McIlhenny drew the short straw; he would have to drive the sleigh while the young women and his friends sat in back.

"Consequently my hands got exceedingly cold," he knowingly told his diary, "and I gave the lines to Mell." While his friend took the reins, McIlhenny, "took care of his girl and my own too – got between them, and made ourselves about as comfortable as persons generally do under such circumstances."

John T. McIlhenny went on to be the editor of the Star and Banner and fought in the Civil War when fratricidal combat broke out in 1861. He died in 1867 a hero, lauded by the town fathers for his military service.

But people are people. You never quite know what those mild-mannered, upstanding historical personalities you read about are doing after you close that history book. Sometimes a hero is also a bit debauched.

The people of the past told all to their diaries. They captured the moments they wanted the world to see. They also captured the ones which expose the cracks of their chauvinistic, teenaged faces under the respectable façade they showed the rest of the world. They were flawed people just like us. And at Adams County Historical Society you can dive into the diaries and letter they wrote to find who they are, warts and all.

John M. Rudy is a volunteer researcher at the Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg. More information can be found at achs-pa.org.