
COMMENTARY

Grounding the grinch

■ Students revolt over restricted holidays.

From 1895 to 1907, any girl who packed her trunks in September for Winthrop College in Rock Hill knew that she would not be allowed to go home until the following June.

The college catalog specified four holidays — Thanksgiving Day, one day at Christmas, Washington's birthday, and Robert C. Winthrop's birthday, which was in May. Holiday literally meant "no classes."

The college catalog also explained why there was only one day at Christmas: "This arrangement is made to save parents extra railroad fare, and to prevent the serious demoralization and loss of time to the students and the disorganization of the College work always consequent upon the breaking up of school within three months after the opening of the sessions."

The catalog said that students who went home for Christmas took too much time to recover from the effects of dissipation while at home.

Annie Perry of Hartsville was an 18-year-old freshman enrolled at Winthrop in the fall of 1896. She wrote her family that two days before Christmas the teachers began decorating the dining room "perfectly beautifully."

Annie wrote about the dining room decorations: "Long steam pipes run the entire length of both sides of the room, and these were festooned with bunting, red, white and blue. Garlands were hung the whole length of the room — the lights were decorated with cedar, holly and greens were put in bunches all around." The two kitchen doors were arched with holly and cedar.

Mr. Bobber, the baker, designed a wall decoration made of green icing and pickles that read "Merry Xmas to All." A dozen large iced cakes were placed before the sign.

The teachers then decorated the main parlors and purchased fruit to give to the girls at their tables. After a lavish dinner, the students were told to take something to their rooms with them for supper, so the kitchen help could go home and have Christmas with their families.

Chapel services were a part of the day. Annie wrote that the music teacher led the students in singing Christmas songs. There was a reception given by the college in the evening but Annie, loyal daughter of a Baptist minister, could not bring herself to attend a social event on Christmas Day.

In 1905, Winthrop students initiated a well-conceived campaign to end the hated restriction of not being able to go home at Christmas. The girls organized themselves and sent a formal ballot to their parents. They wrote their own pleading letters to accompany the ballots, and got back enough ballots to show that a majority of the

parents wished a longer holiday for their daughters.

The students presented the stack of returned ballots to the Board of Trustees in November 1905, but found themselves turned down. Sen. Ben R. Tillman, a longtime member of the board, was adamantly opposed to their proposal.

The students then "went over the heads" of the trustees by turning to the state legislature. They felt sure that a majority of the legislators knew at least one Winthrop student and would come to their aid. A number of the students were "kin."

The S.C. House voted to set aside the Winthrop Board of Trustees' rule allowing only one day at Christmas. Senator Tillman was furious with the students.

Tillman began writing letters from Washington to the S.C. Senate members urging them to ignore such nonsense. The (Columbia) State newspaper got word of Tillman's letter-writing and observed, "Winthrop is not Senator Tillman's private college; it belongs to the people of the state . . . and the sentiment about the full family circle at Christmas time should have consideration."

The bill passed the Senate by a vote of 20 to 17. On Feb. 17, 1906, it became South Carolina law that all S.C. college students must get 10 days of holiday at Christmas.

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