Antarctic Gave Admiral Byrd His Big Christmas

By
REAR ADM. RICHARD E. BYRD

We know that Christmas at the bottom of the world is in the Antarctic midsummer. I have eaten eight Christmas dinners south of the Antarctic Circle, two of them within two days of each other.

Adm. Richard E. Byrd

In 1928 we were bucking through the ice of the Ross Sea with the bark-rigged, wooden sailing ship, the City of New York, on the western side of the 180th meridian, and we had lost a day by so doing. And when Christmas Day arrived we were too busy fighting the ice pack and getting around icebergs to celebrate.

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS DAY

But we had another Christmas Day coming to us. By going to the eastward that day we found smoother ice; and in doing so we crossed back over the Date Line, the 180th meridian, and thus gained a day. Since the ice was smoother that Christmas Day we had a chance to celebrate.

Our cook, George Tennant, served a fine dinner. Our scientist, Taffy Davies, took the part of Santa Claus; and I gave my admiral's uniform to Pvt. Morency (we called him "Little Moe") who presided as admiral. He was a natural born actor and took advantage of the occasion to bawl out everyone in sight, especially myself and the other officers. It was a grand occasion.

THE BARRIER AT LAST

Suddenly, in the midst of our celebration in the ward room, Chief Mate Strom's voice from the crow's nest—"Barrier on the starboard bow"—fell with the abrupt swiftness of long awaited news. There was a clatter of dinner dishes and a race of footsteps up the companionway and a wild crowding of men on the fo'c's'le head in the rigging. The thing we had sailed 11,000 miles to see was before our eyes, a far-flung reach of lifted ice—the Barrier.

As we closed in on this phenomenon, which extended as far as our glasses could reach to the east and west, it appeared to be a wall of ice rising from 100 to 200 feet up from the water. We later found that this enormous sheet of ice that was largely water-borne was 500 miles east and west and over 400 miles north and south, and that it averaged in thickness above the water from 150 to 200 feet, and we knew it would be three or four times that thickness under the water.

FIRST AMERICANS

We knew that we were further south that Christmas Day than any Americans had ever been; and we were to be the first Americans to land anywhere on the continent. We were destined to build eight villages in Antarctica, five of which would be named Little America.

This great continent turned out to be about 6,000,000 square miles in area, about twice the size of the United States. We have since that day looked upon some 4,000,000 square miles of that area hitherto not seen by human beings.

Now scientists from more than 40 nations are moving south in their biggest assault on the geophysical secrets of the Antarctic. What they find may well prove of inestimable value to mankind.

For us, it all started on that Christmas Day in 1928.

CHRISTMAS WARNING

Writing in the Fourth Century, Gregory Nazianzen, archbishop and poet, warned against celebrating Christmas "with excess" and protested against dancing, and decorations of evergreens and boughs which he described as a "heathen practice."

Anglo-Saxons Began Custom Of Wassailing

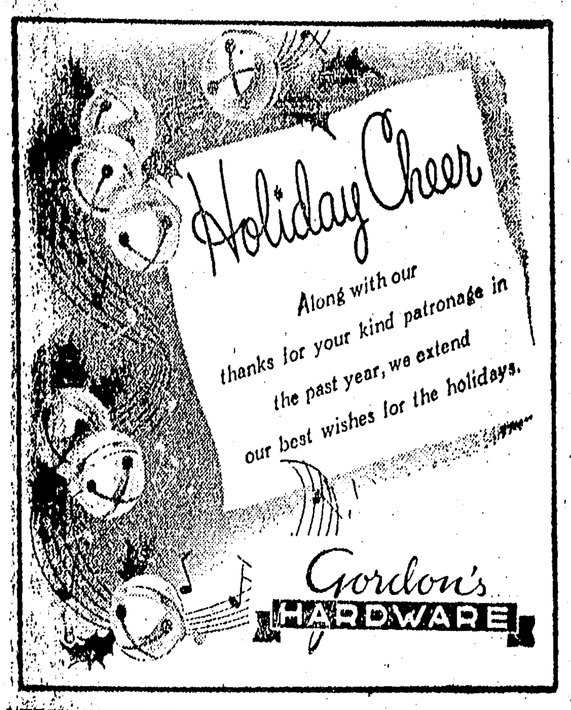
Wassailing (pronounced wos'ling) is an old English Christmas custom of going from door to door singing. Many traditional wassailing songs, though not strictly religious in character, are counted as Christmas carols.

The word comes from the Anglo-Saxon toast "weshal" meaning "be in good health," and the reply was "drinkhail"—"drink good health." In olden days householders entertained wassailers with drinks from the wassail bowl, a warm cheering drink made with ale or wine) flavored with spices, sugar, toast and roasted apples.

One of the oldest English wassail songs runs: "The roads are very dirty, my boots are very thin, I have a little pocket, to put a penny in."

ONE MAN'S VIEW

During Puritan Oliver Cromwell's rule in England, fantastic Hezekiah Woodward published a tract calling Christmas day: "the old heathen's feasting day, the Papist's Massing day, the profane man's ranting day, the superstitious man's idol day, the multitude's idle day, Satan's working day, the true Christian man's fasting day."



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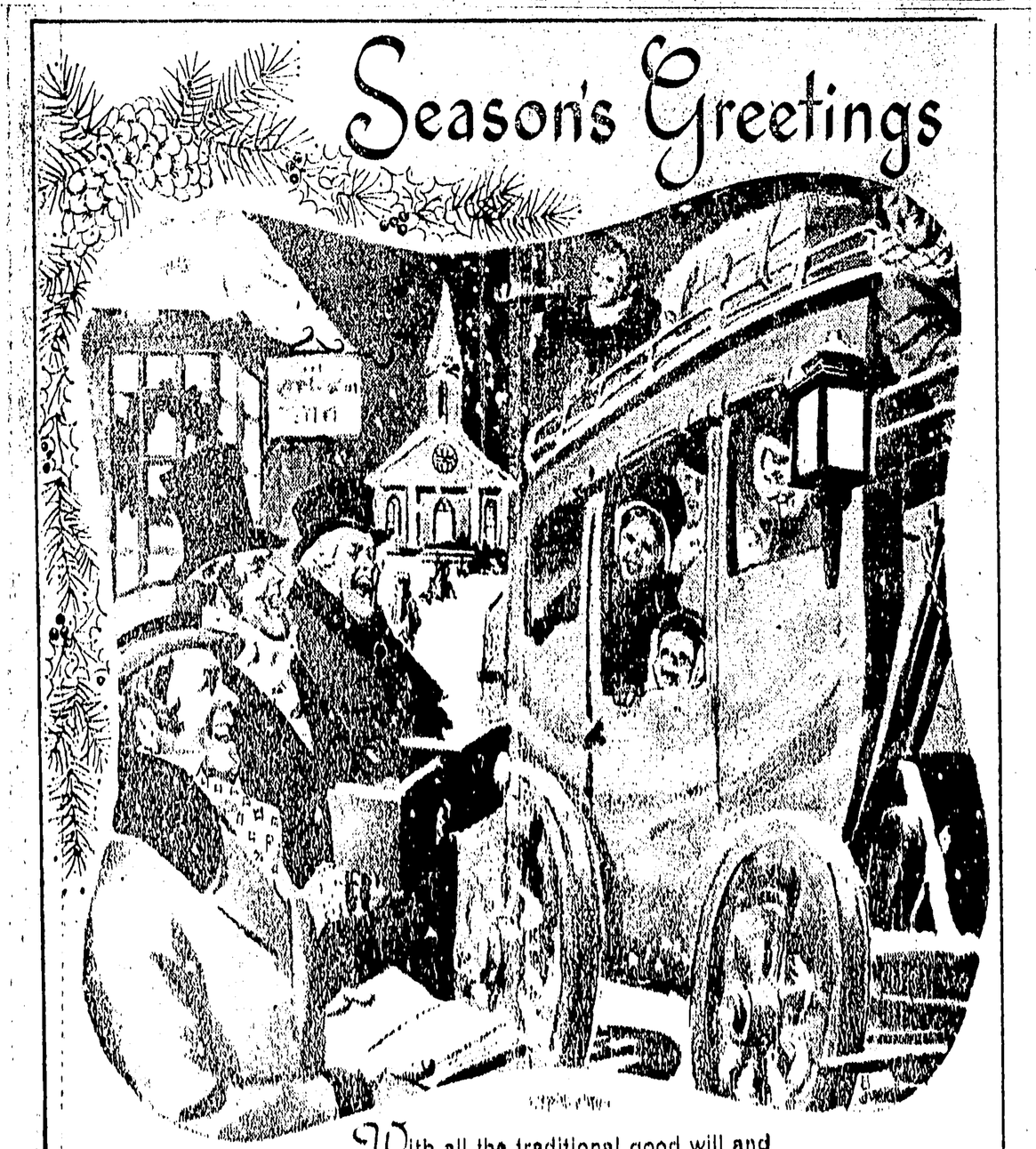
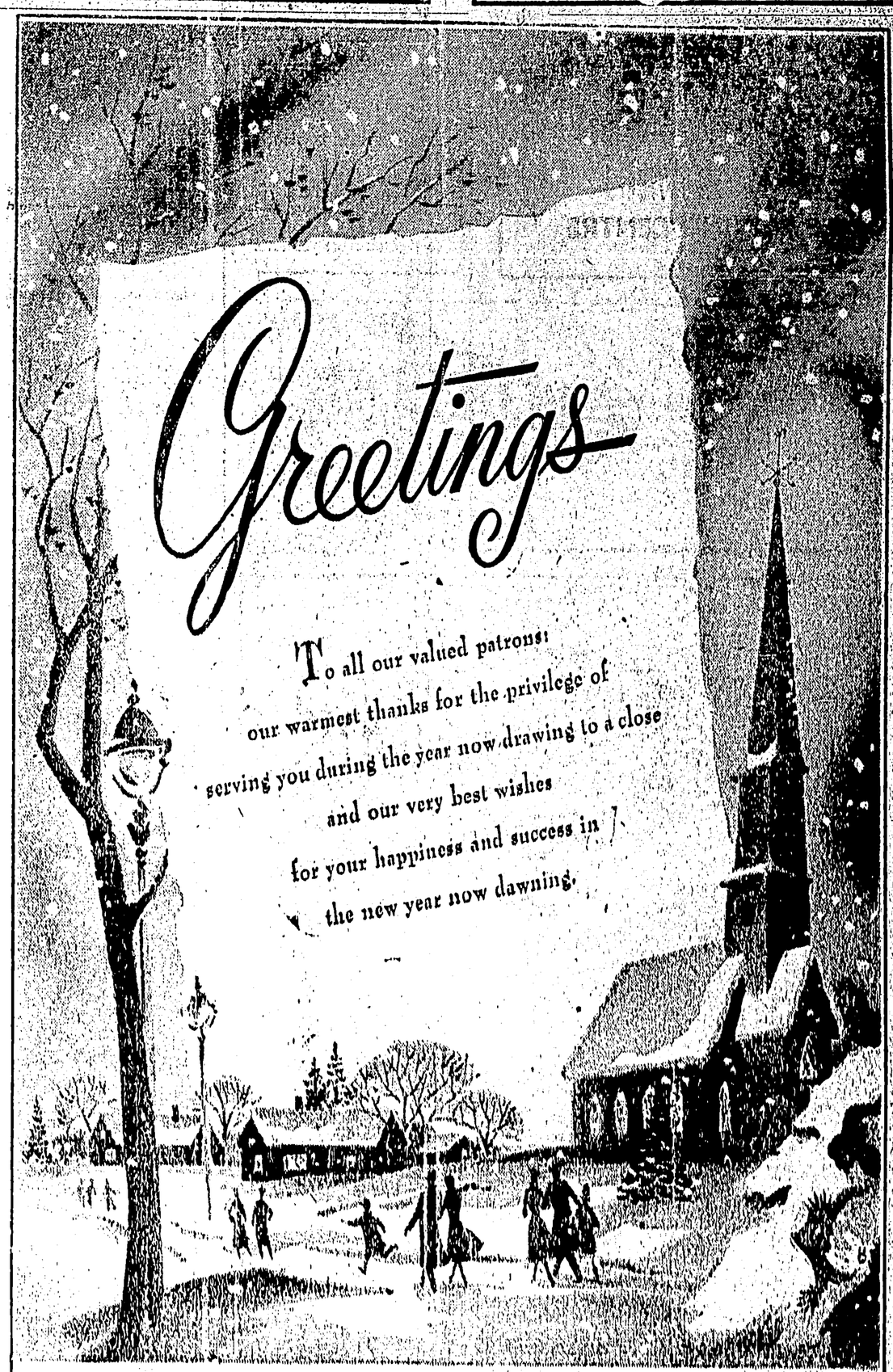


With all the traditional good will and warmth of the Holiday season, we wish the best of everything to our loyal patrons and thank them most heartily for the opportunity of serving them during the past year.

THE ESQUIRE SHOP



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