

The
Bracebridge
Dinner



The Bracebridge Dinner





Foreword . . . Ansel Adams

Text . . . Andrea Fulton

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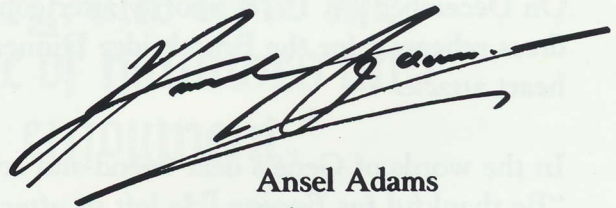
Design . . . Gregory Owens

FOREWORD

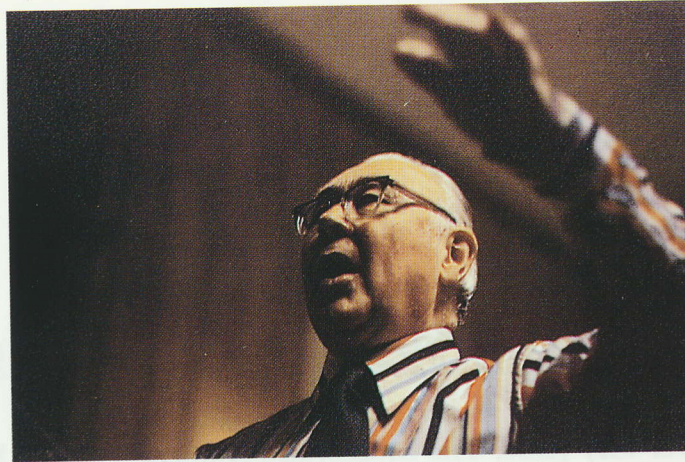
Looking back over fifty years, The Bracebridge Dinners remain a bright memory and a rewarding professional experience. The setting of the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite is unique and it would be difficult to imagine the Bracebridge ceremony in any other environment. The first performances were almost identical in the basic design and sequences of today. Subtle refinements in music and staging have continued since the first performance in 1929.

The Bracebridge intrigued me from the start, not only as a creative concept and challenge but because its inherent level of aesthetics and style seem to relate to the emotional potential of the natural scene. In Yosemite there is that certain natural grandeur and beauty which fine art and music enhance, and inferior human endeavors denigrate.

I am immensely pleased that the Bracebridge ceremony continues under capable and sensitive direction and staff, and I wish it a long and increasingly effective future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ansel Adams', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Ansel Adams
July, 1983



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of Eugene Fulton, Director and Musical Director of the Bracebridge Dinner from 1946 to 1978.

An overwhelming love of music, a great appreciation of people and a wonderful sense of humor—these characteristics typified Eugene Fulton and his life. A remarkable man who touched many with whom he came into contact, he instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment in those with whom he worked, creating a bond that strengthened and grew as time passed.

On December 24, 1978, shortly after completing two Christmas concerts and the dress rehearsal for the Bracebridge Dinner in Yosemite Valley, he died of a sudden heart attack.

In the words of Gene's dear friend and colleague, Bracebridge singer Francis Fogarty: "Be thankful for Eugene. He left us after a happy and successful evening doing what he loved to do in a spot of earth that is one of God's masterpieces. Who of us could wish for a more beautiful time and place in which to fall asleep, and to leave with such a gentle 'Amen'."



There is a tone of solemn and sacred feeling that blends with our conviviality, and lifts the spirit to a state of hallowed and elevated enjoyment."

Irving

Washington Irving, born in New York City in 1782, is recognized as the first of America's great writers. Of British parentage, Irving had the unique ability to characterize not only the distinct spirit and personality of his homeland, but also to faithfully portray the temperament and complexion of life in England, his second home.

Irving's *Sketch Book*, written under the *nom de plume* Geoffrey Crayon, was first published in London in 1820. In *The Sketch Book*, Irving successfully combined essays, short stories and descriptive sketches, perhaps the most celebrated being *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. His characters and locales were derived from his youthful experiences in America, his extensive travels in England, and research on local cultural history at the British Museum.

On January 1, 1820, five Christmas pieces from *The Sketch Book* were published in New York, a gift to America by which Irving hoped to keep vivid the gracious traditions of our British cousins. In 1875, Macmillan published a special edition of these Christmas pieces, charmingly illustrated by Randolph J. Caldecott, which became a standard Yuletide gift.

Irving was concerned that the young American literary world was allowing itself to be diminished by sharp-tongued English critics. He longed for American writers to declare freedom from their English bondage, yet lamented America's broken ties and lost

historical links with England. A compromise with his feelings took the form of "placing England before us as a perpetual volume of reference where are recorded sound deductions from ages of experience".

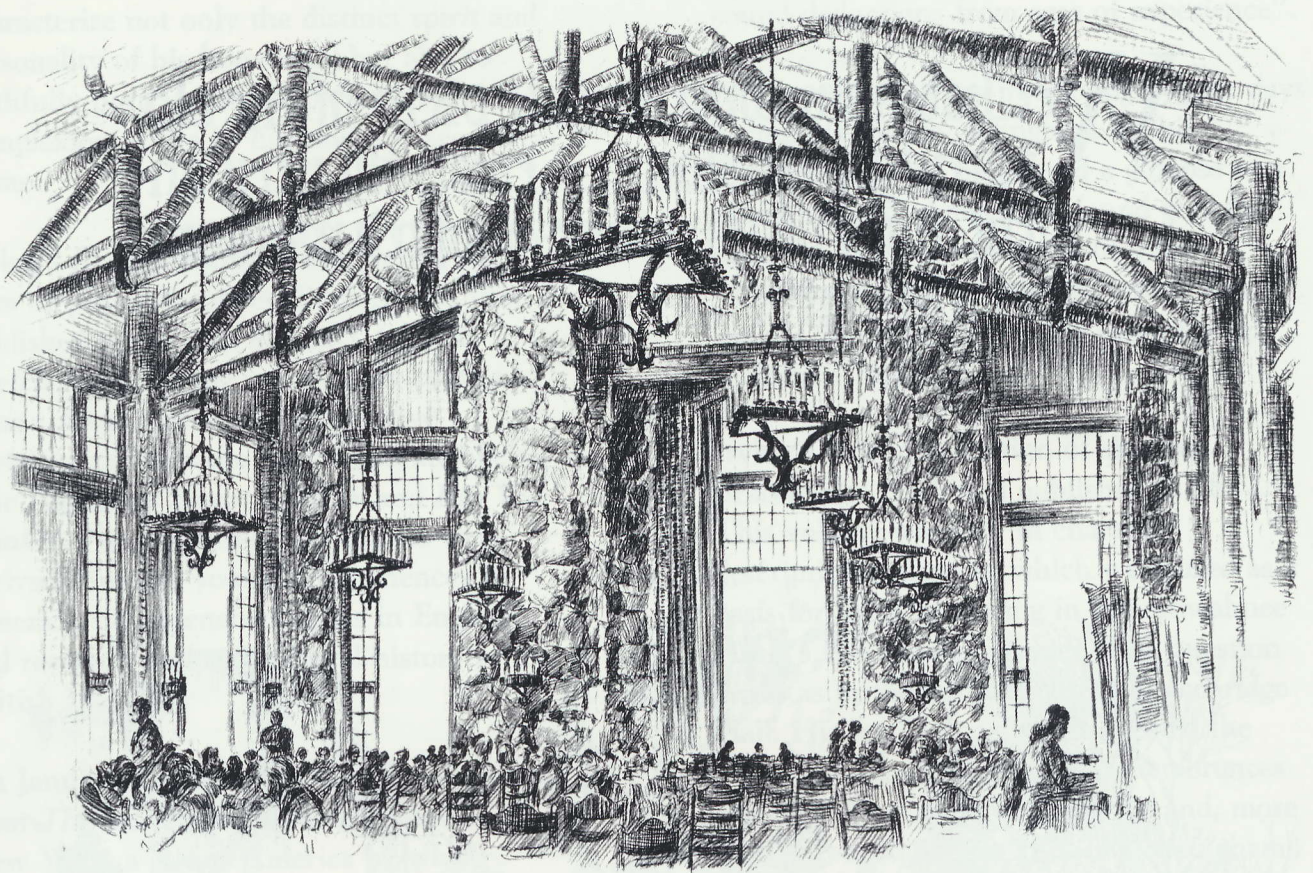
Irving took great joy in reliving bygone days during his travels in England. In his Christmas pieces, he offered a glimpse of a vanishing past. Americans found grateful escape in his remembrances of a self-sufficient agricultural system which had rapidly disappeared to make room for the Industrial Revolution.

Irving's second collection of sketches, *Bracebridge Hall*, was published in 1822. This volume was rich in character descriptions, many of which were used as a basis for those appearing in the Ahwahnee Hotel's Bracebridge Dinner. The question arises as to the authenticity of Bracebridge Hall. His fertile imagination created the Hall, based undoubtedly on remembrances of Barlborough Hall in Cheshire and, more closely related, Aston Hall in Birmingham, now known as Country House Museum. Visits to his friend Sir Walter Scott's manor house, Abbotsford, also played a part in Irving's description of Bracebridge Hall. Scott served as a model for many of Squire Bracebridge's traits but, as Irving said, he "had to be cautious and sparing in drawing from that source".

The traditions of English Christmas festivities depicted in *The Sketch Book* have been recreated for the Ahwahnee Hotel's Bracebridge Dinner.

“We had now come in full view of the old family mansion . . . evidently very ancient, with heavy stone-shafted windows jutting out . . .”





“She received us in the main room of the house, a . . . hall with great brown beams of timber across it. . . .”

The celebration of Christmas in the late 17th century took on new dimensions. England was emerging from years of tyrannical rule under Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan movement. This government had denounced Christmas as a survival of the wicked pagan feast of Saturnalia, the celebration of the return of the sun god. Since no festival of human institution could be allowed to outrank the holiness of the Sabbath, Christmas had been banned by Parliament and the populace ordered to work as on any ordinary day. Suppression of this festival, in either pagan or Christian form, had never been successfully achieved, and secret celebration continued at the risk of severe punishment. As Puritanism moved into the New World, some compensation for the austerity inherent in Puritan beliefs was made with the institution of Thanksgiving Day.

When Christmas was revived after the Restoration, it took on a new complexion. The desire to forget the stringent religious dictates of Puritanism led to a more secular celebration, breaking with much former religious tradition. Rollicking songs, many in praise of food, and mischievous merriment characterized the new English Christmas. This was the celebration witnessed by Washington Irving.

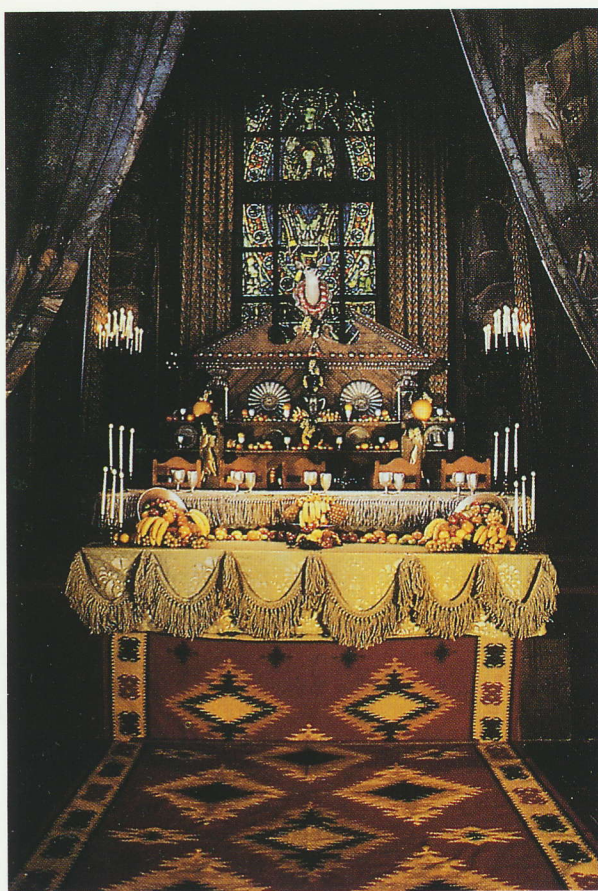
Bracebridge Hall typified the English country estate. Each estate was ruled by a Squire, who acted as landlord, magistrate and advisor on rural economy. A Parson was installed in the manor house for religious instruction, the children's education, and often for the Squire's intellectual stimulation.

The Squire's Housekeeper had the significant task of guaranteeing a full larder, a worthily-stocked wine cellar, and a well-tempered household. Irving described her as an integral element in the smooth functioning of Bracebridge Hall:

“The Housekeeper has a stately air that would not disgrace a lady that had figured at the Court of Queen Elizabeth, and has high authority in the household, ruling over the servants with quiet but undisputed sway.”

A Jester, or Lord of Misrule, was found in the home of every nobleman. This character began his rule, or rather, mis-rule, on All Hallows Eve and continued to Christmas Day. He was the leader of revelries in the home, a holdover from the days of Saturnalia where a mock king was chosen to preside over festivities. The Lord of Misrule was given a measure of power during this time, and all had to submit to his whims, even the Squire. If he was wise, however, the Jester did not overstep the bounds for fear of displeasing his master.

Minstrels were employed by every court and estate. Although many were household members, quite often this post was filled by traveling musicians. News of current events was slow to circulate, and these nomadic singers would often incorporate the intricacies of the latest political and social occurrences into their songs, with, of course, a good deal of their own editorial comment. The singers' strains, whether telling of love, lust, or the latest news, were always awaited with eager anticipation.



“The table was literally loaded with good cheer, and presented an epitome of country abundance. . .”

The house was kept open during the twelve days of Christmas and the festivities shared with the villagers as a symbol of harmony. They arrived at the Hall in procession, led by a man shrouded in white and carrying a hodening horse (a horse's skull, or a wooden effigy) which was attached to a long pole. The jaws were worked by means of a rope or string, opening and closing to symbolize the acceptance of food—or contributions!

The keynote to the success of the Christmas feast was the profusion of foods, each with its own legend.

The fish was the symbol of early Christianity. During times of persecution, Christians often sketched a fish as a means of identifying themselves to fellow Christians. Carried proudly aloft, the presentation of the fish signifies the end of religious suppression.

The peacock, actually a very dry meat and served with an abundance of gravy, was a favorite dish. It was common for knights to take the Peacock Vow. Placing his right hand on the back of the bird, the knight would pledge to strike the first blow at his enemy and to defend the virtue of women.

The custom of presenting a boar's head at the Christmas feast has pagan origins. The god of regeneration, Frey, was symbolized by a boar, which was sacrificed during Saturnalia to ensure many new calves and lambs in the spring. As Christianity took hold, the boar's appearance at the Christmas feast assumed the significance of emancipation from Judaic law: Christ had made all meat clean, and on this night,



“...the joyous disposition of the worthy Squire was perfectly contagious...”

Christians ate pork to celebrate this cleansing. Bringing the boar's head to table also became a renunciation of the practice of animal sacrifice. But the symbolism perhaps most widely ascribed to is Satan, in the form of the boar, being carried in

triumph as a testimony of his final defeat by the Christ child, while the chorus sings:

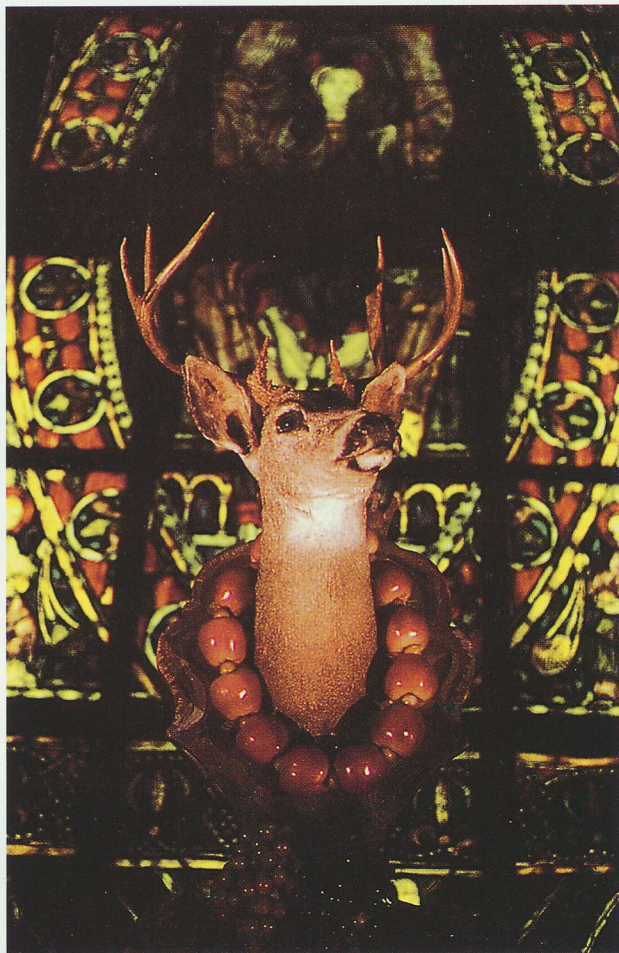
Caput apri defero
Reddens laudus Domino

I bear the boar's head
Rendering praise unto the Lord

The Baron of Beef, two sirloins joined by the backbone, has long been the high-ranking favorite at Christmas feasts. An anonymous poem tells how the loin received its noble title. Charles II went hunting one Christmas and returned to the Hall with a huge stag. All within joyfully partook of the stag, while Charles filled his plate with a loin of beef.

“Quoth Charles, ‘Odd’s fish! a noble dish!
Ay, noble made by me!
By kingly right I dub thee Knight—
Sir Loin henceforward be!’ ”

Plum Pudding, first made around 1670, is a stiffened version of the earlier plum porridge which was composed of similar ingredients but served in a semi-liquid form. Prepared in large copper pots several weeks



“ . . . its windows rich with
tracery and painted
glass . . . ”



“ . . . but I cannot forbear
to notice a pair of antlers
in the Great Hall, which is
one of the trophies of a
hardriding Squire of
former times . . . ”



“...he has also sorted out a choir...for the bass he has sought out all the ‘deep, solemn mouths’ and for the tenor the ‘loud ringing mouths’



...and the ‘sweet mouths’ he has culled with curious taste among the prettiest lasses in the neighborhood...”



before Christmas, the entire household was present at its making and each member took turns stirring the pudding while making a wish. A coin, a thimble, a button and a ring were mixed into the pudding. When each object was found on Christmas day, a special significance was attached to it. A coin meant wealth in the new year; a button, bachelorhood; a thimble, spinsterhood; and a ring, marriage. The superstition prevailed that if plum pudding was not eaten, a friend would be lost before the next Christmas. The pudding came to table amid great anticipation and was the crowning glory of the Christmas feast. No matter how full the stomach, there was always room for plum pudding!

The ancient Anglo-Saxon word *Wassail* was a toast meaning “to your health”. The Wassail bowl was indispensable to the old English feast. In many villages it was customary for the young people to go from one farmhouse to another with a great bowl of spiced ale, inviting all to drink “Wassail”

to the Christmas season. Once again, reference is made to pagan custom, the Wassail being derived from an ancient agricultural festival. To increase the coming year’s harvest, a wintertime procession marched around fruit-bearing trees, sprinkling mulled cider on the roots. Everyone made as much noise as possible to frighten away the evil spirits. Who could possibly remain solemn at such a raucous ceremony? Great fun was had by all, and the Wassail bowl continues to lift spirits—and voices—to this day.

Holly was traditionally placed around the inside of homes to ward off evil spirits. (It was particularly hateful to witches!) It came to be thought of as the image of the Savior’s crown of thorns, and a hope for peace and goodwill. It was offered at Christ’s birthday as a symbol of deepest reverence. The holly is presented to Squire Bracebridge with the hope that “peace and love abide in our hearts forever”.



“ . . . even the sound of the Waits, rude as may be their minstrelsy, breaks upon the mid-watches of a winter night with the effect of perfect harmony.”

“A bird . . . was basking
himself in the sunshine
and piping a few querulous
notes. . .”



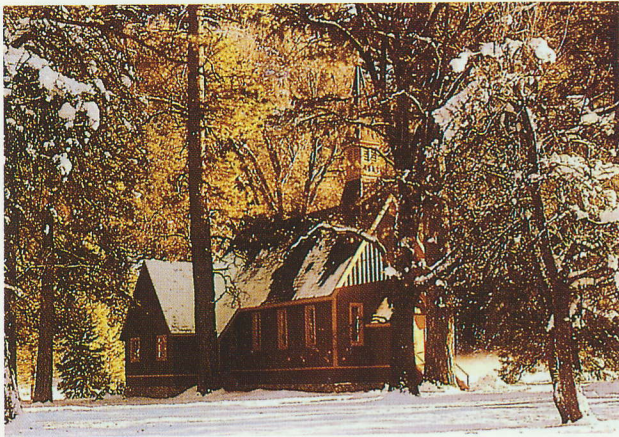
And the music! For what characterizes Christmas at Bracebridge Hall more than the warmth and joy of voices raised in glorious song? To quote from Irving:

“I do not know a grander effect of music on the mortal feelings than to hear the full choir and the pealing organ performing a Christmas anthem . . . and filling every part of the vast pile with triumphant harmony.”



After the restoration of Christmas in England, songs abounded in praise of the feast itself. Relatively few were of a religious nature. Carols were originally ring dances accompanied by singing. In time, the dancing was omitted and the carol became a joyous song. Christmas carols, when religious in nature, refrained from preaching, and spoke exultantly of the Christ's child's birth. Many carols were written by wandering scholars, who often used macaronic form, setting part of the text in the vernacular and part in Latin. While carols were festive and their messages simple, hymns were solemn and dwelt on the supernatural aspect of Christmas, and, in the context of the Restoration, were not widely used. But the profoundly spiritual feeling derived from sacred music would, indeed, be a sore omission, so our Bracebridge Dinner contains three of the most beautiful chorales written: *Angelus ad Virginem*, *O Jesu, So Sweet*, and *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*.

Whether the praise be to the Christ child's birth or to the joy of friendship and feasting, the music of the Christmas season



“ . . . clumps of gigantic trees, heaping up rich piles of foliage; the solemn pomp of groves and woodland glades, with the deer trooping in silent herds across them . . . the brook, taught to wind in natural meanderings or expanded into a glassy lake; the sequestered pool, reflecting the quivering trees, with the yellow leaf sleeping on its bosom, and the trout roaming fearlessly about its limpid waters . . . and heaven with its deep delicious blue and its cloudy magnificence, all fill us with mute but exquisite delight, and we revel in the luxury of mere sensation.”

is well described in this anonymous poem:

“Majestic Harmony doth swell triumphant
to the skye!
As Spirits soar with gladness, the Heav’ns
do make reply:
‘This Fes’tal Day in joyous song now all
your voices raise.
With eloquence of Musick forever shew
forth praise!’ ”

Recreating Washington Irving’s Bracebridge Hall in Yosemite Valley was indeed fitting. Irving’s deep love of nature is evident in his writings, and his descriptive sketches seem to foreordain the choice of Yosemite as the contemporary home of the Bracebridge Dinner:

“It is a pleasing sight of a Sunday morning, when the bell is sending its sober melody across the quiet fields to behold the peasantry . . . thronging tranquilly along the lanes to church.”

Irving lived abroad for seventeen years, writing, traveling and working in his country’s diplomatic service. He returned to America to find his name a household word, for he had become the first American writer to be accepted as an equal in English literary circles, an honor well earned in view of his untiring efforts to have American authors gain stature and distinction as a literary entity.

Irving ended his Christmas sketches with these sad words foretelling the certain demise of the richness and splendor of Bracebridge Hall’s halcyon days:





“The company have now almost all taken their departure. I have determined to do the same tomorrow morning; and I hope my reader may not think that I have already lingered too long at the Hall. I have been tempted to do so, however, because I thought I had lit upon one of the retired places where there are yet some traces to be met with of old English character. A little while hence, and all these will probably have passed away. . . The good Squire, and all his peculiarities, will be buried in the neighboring church. The old Hall will be modernized into a fashionable country-seat, or, peradventure, a manufactory. The park

will be cut up into petty farms and kitchen gardens. A daily coach will run through the village; it will become, like all other commonplace villages, thronged with coachmen, post-boys, tipplers, and politicians; and Christmas. . . and all the other hearty merry-makings of the ‘good old days’ will be forgotten.”

As you depart Bracebridge Hall, we hope you will have captured traces of the festivities so loved by Irving and that you will not forget this “hearty merry-making of the ‘good old days’ ”.



The yule log

“Come, bring with a noise
Ye merrie, merrie boyes,
The Christmas log to the firing:
While my good dame, she
Bids ye all be free,
And drink to your heart’s desiring.”

Herrick

The Yule Log Ceremony, traditionally presented on Christmas Eve in the Great Lounge of the Ahwahnee Hotel, is a component of the Bracebridge Hall Christmas story.

The Yule log was, and indeed still is, in many homes in Great Britain, an integral part of Christmas. The Yule Log ceremony is rooted in pagan custom. The world worshipped countless gods before the appearance of Christianity, but the deification of the sun was the common thread linking all civilizations. Solstice fires were regarded as a symbol of the sun, the principal pagan god, and signified the return of light to the world. Originally the Yule season celebrated the turning of the Wheel of Time, when people believed the sun stood still for twelve days. The log had to be kept burning during this time. If it went out, bad luck was portended for the entire year. Three kinds of people were unwelcome while the log was burning: a squinting person, one with bare feet, but, above all, a flat-footed woman! The Yule log was laid in the fireplace and lighted with great flourish. A branch of mistletoe was placed upon it before it was ignited by a fiery brand.

Northern Britain's Celtic population included the worship of mistletoe among its most revered rites. This plant grew on the oak tree which, as a conductor of lightning, and hence a sacred means of obtaining fire, was considered a holy tree. The plant's medicinal properties and its mysticism were derived from its growth in tree tops far above the ground. Mistletoe's lack of root system caused the Celts to bestow spiritual powers upon it.

Celtic druid priestesses invoked nature with all its power and beauty to intercede between the gods and the "powers of darkness":

"... The sun with its brightness and the snow with its whiteness, and fire with all the strength it hath, and lightning with its rapid wrath, and the winds with their swiftness along their path, and the sea with its deepness, and the rocks with their steepness, and the earth with its starkness—all these I place by the gods' almighty help and grace between myself and the powers of darkness."

Our Christmas festivities take place in late December, not, as commonly accepted, because Christ was born at this time, but because Saturnalia, the celebration of the return of the sun god, was a sacred time throughout the Roman empire. At Saturnalia, all distinction of rank was forgotten. Wreaths were given as gifts and homes were decorated with evergreens.

When missionaries brought the message of Christianity to pagan lands, they found that many of the old rites and customs simply could not be suppressed. The wiser view was to incorporate those which were deeply revered into Christian ritual. This compromise has bestowed pagan influence on many Christian observances.

As one looks through the vaulted windows of the Great Lounge to the fields and spires of Yosemite Valley during this ancient ceremony, a feeling of closeness to nature invades the mind. To quote from Irving:

"The mind drinks deep but quiet drafts of inspiration, and becomes intensely sensible of beauty and majesty of nature. The imagination kindles into revery and rapture; vague but exquisite images and ideas keep breaking upon it; and we revel in a mute and almost incommunicable luxury of thought."



“... the preparations making on every side for the social board that is again to unite friends and kindred.”

Irving





Horns throughout the hall call the guests to dinner.



Framed by the magnificent arched alcove in Bracebridge Hall, the choristers sing the fourteenth-century carol "ANGELUS AD VIRGINEM" as the guests are seated.



The Dinner



The guests, at the sound of trumpet fanfare, rise to greet Squire Bracebridge and his retinue.

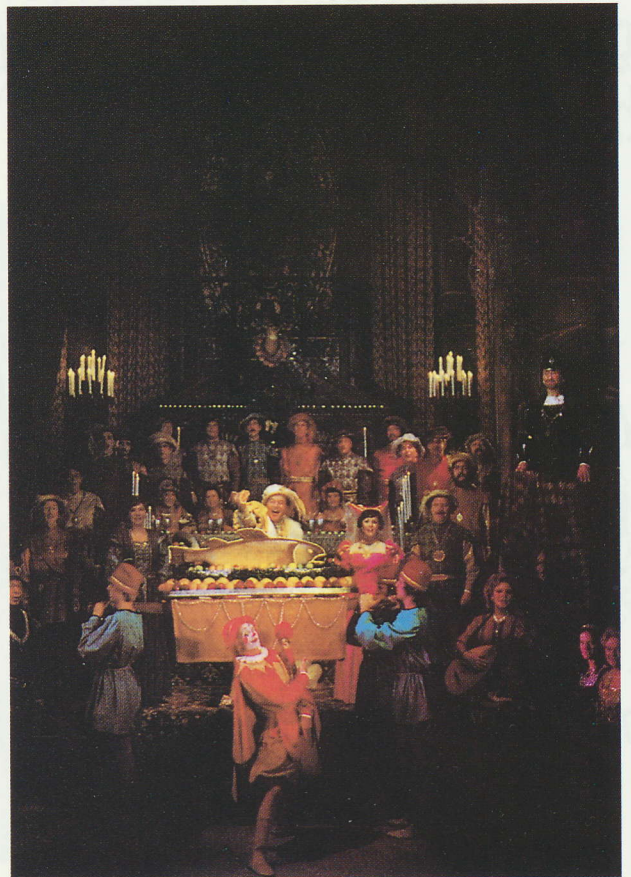
A most noble feast has been prepared, the housekeeper informs the Squire. . . "the best my larder doth afford" . . . and the guests are bidden hail to Bracebridge Hall.





“Welcome All!” intones the Parson, bidding each guest to . . . “nourish laughter, gloom destroy.” Squire Bracebridge has invited the Parson to . . . “preach the fare” . . . and he first espies . . . “a seemingly dish, indeed, no other than the Fish.”

The festively-adorned fish is borne to Squire Bracebridge’s table, amid a stately procession of lackeys, litterbearers, servitors and choristers. Upon being presented the Fish, the Squire adds the relish: . . . “sauce and citrus well embellish!”



'Tis the custom to open the Hall's doors to the people of the village. Led by the Hodening Horse, the band is entreated to partake of Squire Bracebridge's largesse on this most holy of nights.



The antics of the Lord of Misrule entertain Squire and guests alike.

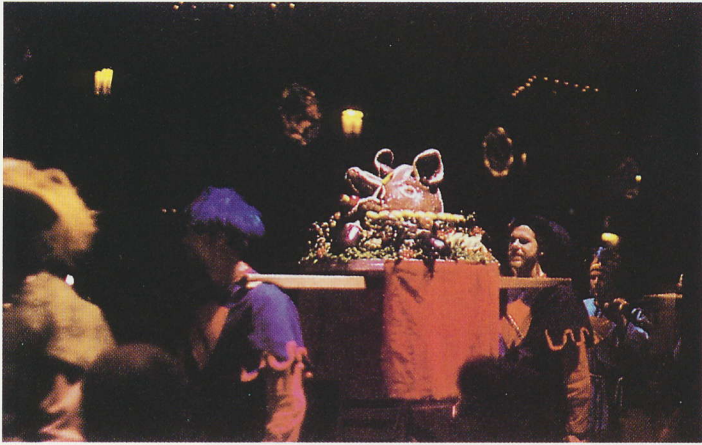




“And now there comes the Peacock Pie—With feathers spread & head held high... Serve the peacock, and I’m guessing, ‘Tis replete with spicy dressing!”

The Squire and his guests are reminded of the true meaning of this holy day, with soloist and chorus singing the “CANTIQUÉ DE NOËL.”





“Hail, the Boar’s head
comes on high!
Wreathed in garlands
doth it lie. . .



“. . . With gesture brief,
I knight thee
Sir Loin, Baron of Beef!”





The bear takes great delight in frightening the younger guests of Squire Bracebridge.

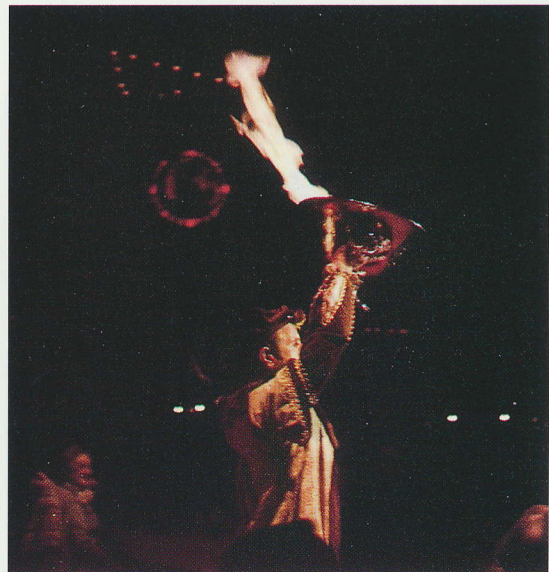
The Squire's guests enjoy the minstrel's strains.





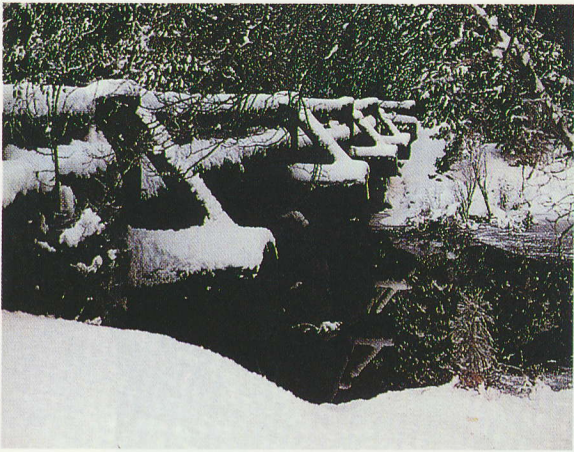
A branch of holly is presented to Squire Bracebridge as the symbol of . . . “hope for peace and good will for all the dominions of man throughout the world. May peace and love abide in our hearts forever.”

“Rich in every luscious detail Comes the pudding and Wassail!”



“The feast has ended, not the pleasure.
Mirth awaits in ample measure.
But, before ye guests shall start
To make ye ready to depart,
Shall the Squire and family file
In gracious group adown the aisle,
Bowing to each right good friend,
Love and joy to all they send.”





Lo, now is come the joyful'st feast!
Let every man be jolly,
Each room with yvie leaves is drest,
And every post with holly.
Now all our neighbours' chimneys smoke,
And Christmas blocks are burning;
Their ovens they with bak't meats choke,
And all their spits are turning.
Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if, for cold, it hap to die,
We'll bury't in a Christmas pye,
And evermore be merry.

Withers's Juvenilia



Donald B. Tressider, past president of the Yosemite Park and Curry Co., with his wife Mary Curry Tressider — circa 1930's.

Photo by Ansel Adams

The year 1927 was filled with excitement in Yosemite National Park, for it was the year the Ahwahnee Hotel first opened its doors to the Valley's visitors.

Donald B. Tressider, President of the Yosemite Park and Curry Co., envisioned a Christmas program that would become a tradition at the new Ahwahnee, and employed the well-known California pageant director Garnet Holme to produce a special festivity. Holme chose the Christmas portion of Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* upon which to base the Ahwahnee's first Bracebridge Dinner. Holme's text, best described as extemporaneous, captured the essence of Irving's Christmas feast, but the refinement and definition of the production was yet to come. Nonetheless, the first Bracebridge Dinner was a success, with Tressider as the Squire, a role he dearly

loved playing until his death in 1948. His wife, Mary Curry Tressider, joined him at the head table, as did ranking officials of the Curry Company and the National Park Service.

The most notable of the primarily amateur actors was the young nature photographer Ansel Adams, who played the Lord of Misrule. The services of a male chorus were employed, assembled by Harold Saville, who acted as both assistant to Adams and technical director for forty-four years.

Holme's untimely death in 1929 created the need for a new director, and the obvious choice was Adams. After his appointment, the Bracebridge Dinner, as it is known today, evolved. Mr. Adams, a fine pianist as well as photographer, conceived a text that had musical overtones: the meter of the

verse had the strong feeling of a four-beat rhythm, which was emphasized by the music he chose to accompany the stately processions down the long dining room aisle. Adams created the role of Major-domo, leading each elaborate presentation to the head table for the Squire's approval. He played the new part superbly. His wife, Virginia, sang the role of the Housekeeper, her rich voice lending the necessary authority to this important character.

The text and the musical selections have remained largely intact throughout the years. Further poetry for the proceedings has been written into the text by the two directors following Mr. Adams' retirement, Eugene Fulton and Andrea Fulton. The meter has been observed in these additions, and the musical numbers chosen by Mr. Fulton have greatly enhanced the production.

The offerings to Squire Bracebridge are giant representations of the actual courses being served the diners. Made of *papier mache*, the fish, the boar's head and the baron of beef, the peacock pie and plum pudding are decorated with fruits, vegetables and flourishes of vivid color. They are borne on the shoulders of litter bearers who are flanked by lackeys, servitors and chorus to form a most impressive procession. Each course is announced by the Parson, who acts as Master of Ceremonies for the pageant.

Two more artists, already renowned in the Valley for their superior work at the Ahwahnee Hotel, joined Adams in 1929. Having studied stained glass design at the Louvre, Jeannette Dyer Spencer created the superb stained glass insets in the windows of the Great Lounge. Soon her additional

artistic talents were discovered by the Curry Company and she was invited to take on the assignment of Interior Decorator of the Ahwahnee Hotel.

Tressider asked Mrs. Spencer to become costume designer and decorator and generally be responsible for the production of the Dinner. One of her most spectacular contributions is the magnificent stained glass window behind the head table, which dominates the Ahwahnee dining room each Christmas. She says of it:

"It tells the Christmas story and harmonizes in the telling with the beauty and nobility of the scene which nature unfolds in Yosemite during the holiday season. Enthroned in an aureole form the Virgin Mary holds the Christ child on her knee while four angels offer incense and shepherds gaze from below in adoration. The color, a lacquer paint on parchment, is the rich color of medieval stained glass: ruby red, deep blue, green, a little yellow, and glowing lavender pink."

The lofty windows in the dining room are adorned with her stained glass roundels, each depicting a legend from old English folklore. The curtain flanking the head table is another Spencer creation.

Washington Irving said the costumes "did not bear testimony to deep research", and that gave Mrs. Spencer freedom to create picturesque dress. The colors and style of the Renaissance period appealed to her, and from that the costume theme was developed.

Eldridge Theodore (Ted) Spencer was originally employed as architect for the cottages built on the grounds of the hotel. His wonderfully gentle manner was translated into all his work, and his ability to blend structure with nature made him a pioneer in environmental architecture. Soon

he became the official architect for the Yosemite Park and Curry Co.

Spencer designed and built the set still in use today: the buffet, the cartouche with the stag's head, the Parson's pulpit, all reflecting the arched feeling of the great window. Utilizing his research of the period, he introduced the cheese-serving mice into the proceedings, the hodening horse, and the Russian performing bear, originally played by the Spencer's daughter, Valerie. For several years their daughter, Doris, sang the role of the Minstrel.

As the years passed, the Bracebridge Dinner became the classic tradition Don Tressider

had envisioned. Its fame reached not only across the United States but on to Europe, primarily, of course, to England, where the British were enthralled to know of such a faithful replica of their Christmas tradition.

World War II caused a suspension of normal hotel function as the Ahwahnee was converted into a Naval hospital from 1943 to 1946. Those years, and two major floods, marked the only interruptions in the presentation of the Bracebridge Dinner since its start.

After the war ended in 1945, the hotel was vacated by the Navy and the enormous task of restoring the Ahwahnee to its original



*A young Ansel Adams sets up a shot during the Bracebridge Dinner rehearsals.
Circa 1930's.*

YPCC Collection



At an early Bracebridge Dinner, Virginia Best Adams, wife of Ansel Adams, leads a chorus of singers. Photo by Ansel Adams. Circa 1930's.

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splendor began. The Bracebridge Dinner of 1946 highlighted the hotel's triumphant reopening.

Through these years, Ansel Adams had gained such stature and recognition as a photographer that he had limited time to devote to the Bracebridge. In 1946, he asked Eugene Fulton, a well-known Bay Area choral conductor and voice teacher, to become Musical Director. Fulton contributed high musical values: opulence of tone; hearty, robust sound; great attention to musical detail; precision and high quality of repertoire. He wrote numerous vocal arrangements which captured the finest qualities of male chorus singing. This vibrant, new choral sound ringing through

the air gave an additional thrill to the already visually magnificent dinner.

Fulton's wife, Anna-Marie, accompanied the group, and her extensive organizational skills aided the coordination of the complex production. She continues as a valued member of the cast, both as a singer and organist for the Dinner.

These post-war years began a refining of the Dinner, to bring an evermore polished performance to guests at Bracebridge Hall.

In 1956, George Willey became Squire Bracebridge. Since that time he has brought to the part a spirit so contagiously congenial that one might think he was Irving's actual

model for his Squire of *The Sketch Book*. His wife, Jill, has joined him each year, adding grace and charm as Lady Bracebridge.

The Parson, a role of great importance, has been played by Geoffrey Lardner since 1959. A consummate actor, Lardner's Parson lends an air of authority that far surpasses Irving's original concept of this member of Squire Bracebridge's retinue.

Raymond Manton, tenor soloist for thirty-three years, provided many truly memorable musical moments during the Christmas week. Recognizing Mr. Manton's exceptional vocal ability, Eugene Fulton added Adolph Adam's *Cantique de Noel* to the music selected for the Dinner and each year Mr. Manton's singing of this number met with tremendous audience response, and an inevitable encore. Mr. Manton retired in 1983. He will long be remembered for the beauty his voice lent to the Bracebridge Dinner and the excitement of his operatic offerings during the concerts in the Great Lounge.

Jacqueline Victorino played the role of the Housekeeper until 1979 and now takes the part of Ward of the Squire. Her dramatically beautiful soprano voice is one of the most thrilling additions to the Chorale's concerts at Christmastime.

In 1972 the Spencers retired from the Yosemite Park and Curry Co. and the Bracebridge Dinner, followed in 1973 by Ansel Adams. The contributions of these three immensely talented people will be felt as long as the Bracebridge Dinner is presented. Their inspiration in conceiving and developing this drama has given Yosemite Park & Curry Co. the unique

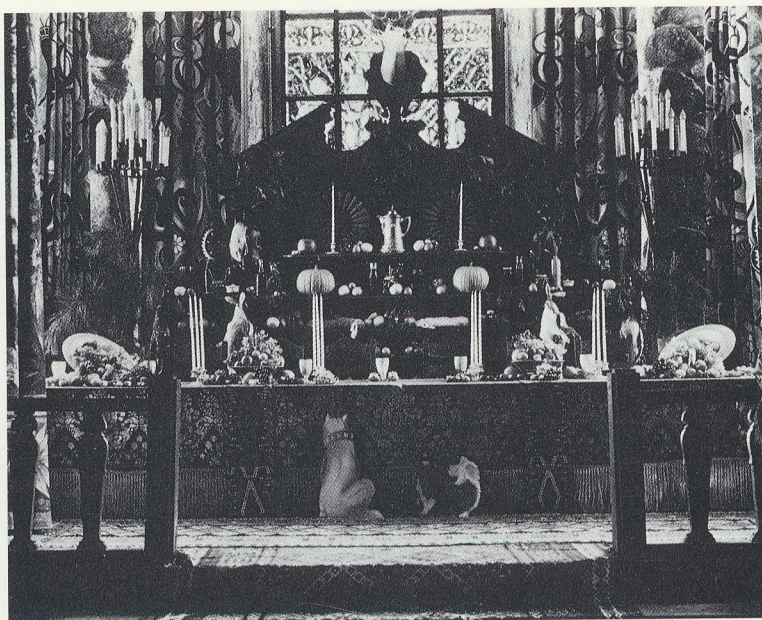


Mary Curry Tresidder posing before Bracebridge Dinner c 1928.

Photo Courtesy of National Park Service

honor of offering to the public a presentation of the highest possible artistic merit in Yosemite National Park.

Upon the retirement of Adams and the Spencers, Eugene Fulton became the director of the Bracebridge, and Carol Aronovici took the position of costume and lighting designer. Aronovici had been assistant and technical director to Garnet



Head table at an early Bracebridge Dinner circa 1930's.

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Holme in 1927, but other commitments had prevented him from joining Holme in Yosemite at that time. Forty-four years later, he was finally to add his talents to the production. Under his direction, new costumes were designed, following Jeannette Spencer's original conception. His lighting design gave the already colorful pageant a new grandeur.

The Bracebridge Singers, now known as the Eugene Fulton Chorale, are a unique group characterized by their collective love for Yosemite's Christmas festivities, as well as their repeated and dedicated participation in the Bracebridge. Performing longevity for some of the singers amounts to twenty, twenty-five—even thirty-five years! The chorus, a closely knit group which enjoys a "family" feeling, is made up of professional singers and instrumentalists, music teachers, music students, and some for whom singing is simply a passion.

Responding to an overwhelming demand, a second performance of the Bracebridge

Dinner was added beginning on Christmas Day of 1956, and on Christmas Eve, 1978, a third performance was initiated. Other programs flourish during the Christmas week: concerts by the Eugene Fulton Chorale in the Great Lounge have met with great acclaim and are eagerly attended by hotel guests and Valley residents alike; a Chopin recital by Theodora Carras Primes on Christmas Eve morning; a reading of Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales* by Geoffrey Lardner; a four-hand piano recital by John McCarthy (a Bracebridge Singer) and his wife Annamarie; and, perhaps one of the most touching moments of the season, a pictorial presentation of the Bracebridge Dinner and its participants, accompanied by Baroque music, photographed and produced by Robert Primes.

The success of a production as grand in scope as the Bracebridge Dinner depends on the talents and contributions of many people. Rarely is an audience aware of the extent of work done by these behind-the-

scenes personalities. The Bracebridge Dinner would suffer considerably without the fine work and support of the following people:

Edward C. Hardy, President and Chief Operating Officer, Yosemite Park and Curry Co. Mr. Hardy's unfailing support and enthusiasm for the Bracebridge Dinner has allowed it to develop as an ever more significant event. His friendship and hospitality to the singers and cast during the Christmas week has set a tone of conviviality which may even rival that of the original Squire Bracebridge.

John O'Neill, General Manager, the Ahwahnee Hotel. Mr. O'Neill has shown an incredibly fine sense of cooperation during his tenure in Yosemite Valley. His never-ending work has enabled the Dinner to run more smoothly than at any time during its history. The following quote from Irving's *Sketch Book* sums up the product of Mr. O'Neill's superlative management:

"The work of the house is performed as if by magic, but it is the magic of system. Nothing is done by fits and starts, nor at awkward seasons; the whole goes on like well-oiled clockwork, where there is no noise nor jarring in its operations."

The hotel kitchen is a masterpiece of organization. The staff is rehearsed in their "parts" and the movement and design of the service approach the precision of a carefully choreographed ballet. The seven courses are prepared with infinite care, each chef taking great pride in the product of his station: the crispest of salads, huge caldrons of fine soup, tender poultry, and beef aged and prepared to perfection. No detail is considered too small for this kitchen!

Carl Stephens, Decorator, the Ahwahnee

Hotel. Mr. Stephens, involved in the Bracebridge Dinner since 1954, is responsible not only for the decorative effects of the Dinner but the "nature" artistry seen throughout the hotel. He adorns the many litters presented to Squire Bracebridge, "sets" the head table, places the stained glass roundels and garlands which hang high in the windows of the dining room, and presents the flaming Wassail Bowl to Squire Bracebridge.

Martha Miller, Bracebridge Coordinator. Among her many talents utilized by Yosemite Park and Curry Co., Ms. Miller is in charge of all the Dinner reservations and seating—no small task. A marvel of organization, she handles this difficult assignment with amazing polish, and her graciousness as a hotel hostess is readily felt by all the guests.

Long aware of the Bracebridge Dinner's world-wide appeal, the National Park Service has been concerned about the relatively small number of people able to be accommodated at the three Christmas dinners. In order to ensure a fair method of selecting guests, a lottery was instituted by the National Park Service in 1977. Each January, those wishing to attend the Dinner send applications to the Ahwahnee Hotel. From tens of thousands of requests, eleven hundred and forty guests are impartially chosen. Appreciation is due the National Park Service for their solution to this problem.

Last, but far from least, the legions of appreciative guests are an integral part of Bracebridge, for their support and enthusiastic response is essential to the success of the performances.

Eugene Fulton's death on Christmas Eve



Printed in Hong Kong

Rosine (Otto) Baldawf was the minstrel during the 1930's. This picture appeared on the cover of Life Magazine during that time. Photo by Ansel Adams.

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day, 1978, was an enormous shock and sorrow to the singers and cast of the Bracebridge Dinner, but the old adage, “the show must go on”, was observed. The Fulton family and singers remained in Yosemite to complete not only the three Bracebridge Dinners, but also the final concert on December 26, aware that Fulton would have been greatly upset if the productions were cancelled. It is a tribute to his strong leadership that the guests were unaware of his death until the final notes of the last concert finished echoing through the Great Lounge. His daughter, Andrea Fulton, took over the direction of the Dinner and also its music. Having participated since the age of five, first as a Villager and Ward of the Squire, then as Minstrel for sixteen years, she had an

intimate knowledge of the pageant which has enabled her to maintain the perspectives of Ansel Adams and her father. The polishing and fine-tuning which has always characterized the direction of the Bracebridge Dinner continues. Attention to details of musical excellence, additions to text and song, and expansion of the musical forces have brought the production, under her direction, to a new level of opulence.

Over decades, the shape of this great American tradition has grown to fulfill the vision of its instigators. And more! May the Bracebridge Dinner continue to flourish for many years to come, and in the words of Washington Irving “. . . may we feel the influence of the season beaming into our souls . . .”!

