

The First Carolcade

Local legend has it that the voices of a small group of Girl Scouts overheard among the aisles of Vidler's 5&10 on East Aurora's Main Street in 1968 launched what has become one of the most successful Christmas traditions in these parts.

The Vidlers offered candy to the young visitors that year and were so impressed by the Christmas cheer that in early December of the following year—1969—they placed a classified advertisement in the East Aurora Advertiser asking additional carolers to stop by their store anytime during the holiday season.

"Free box of candy for any bona fide Christmas carol group that sings in front of Vidler's store," the tiny ad proclaimed. "After singing, have your director stop in for the candy to be passed out to the group."

Many, many voices were heard in Vidler's store that year. That tiny classified ad turned into a full-page advertisement in the following years that featured photographs from Ed Vidler's caroling scrapbook. According to Ed Vidler's handwritten notes preserved by his family and currently on exhibit at the Aurora Town Historian's Office, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H groups, churches and neighborhoods formed small singing troupes and trekked to the red and white awning.

Twenty-one different groups came to Vidler's in 1972. According to a newspaper account, four families continued their tradition of pulling up in front of the store on the back of a pick-up truck.

"This year will be our fourth year encouraging group caroling on Main Street," Ed and Ginny Vidler wrote in their advertisement in 1972, the same year new holiday decorations designed by local artist Rix Jennings debuted along Main Street. "We hope it will become a tradition. Strolling on Main Street on a crisp winter night, pausing for a carol or to greet friends and enjoy Rix Jennings' original Christmas art decorations can give you a slice of small-town Americana found only in East Aurora. Why not try it?"

So many groups showed up on Main Street throughout the holiday season that the Vidlers and other civic leaders decided in 1973 to encourage the caroling on one night. They blocked off Main Street to vehicular traffic, asked local singer Billie Lucas to lead the caroling and commissioned Rix Jennings to design the official logo. And they offered refreshments to all who came. Seaman, Hood and Morey Department Store provided the hot chocolate.

How pleased the Carolcade founders would be to see the tradition still going strong five decades later! The 50th annual



FREE box of candy for any bona fide Christmas carol group that sings carols in front of Vidler's store. After singing, have your director stop in for the candy to be passed out to the group. Vidler's 5c & 10c Store. 20-3

The classified advertisement that started the Carolcade tradition, published in the East Aurora Advertiser, December 1969.



Photograph from the East Aurora Advertiser

The "crowd" at the first official Carolcade, 1973. Billie Lucas, longtime master of ceremonies, is pictured on the far left.



Carolcade will be held—as tradition dictates—on the last Saturday before Christmas Eve, Dec. 17, from 7-8 p.m., in front of Vidler's 5&10.

Ed Vidler said in a 2005 interview that the community event was born during a brainstorming session around a cozy fireplace, and that Virginia Hamilton, a local historian, civic leader and mother of current Advertiser Publisher Grant M. Hamilton, came up with the name

"Carol-cade," perhaps inspired by Jackie Gleason's popular television program, "Cavalcade of Stars."

"She just combined 'caroling' and 'parade,'" Ed Vidler said.

In its advertisement for the first official Carolcade in 1973, Vidler's store encouraged everyone to "bring flashlights, lanterns and candles and be on Main Street" between 7 and 8 p.m. the Saturday before Christmas Eve.

They came on foot, by antique car and by horse-drawn carriage. More than 400 people gathered at Main and Church streets, according to a newspaper report.

The director's stage was later moved to the intersection of Main Street and Temple Place. The Ministerium, a group of East Aurora churches, eventually took over the planning of the event, followed later by the Greater East Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Many carolers have continued to heed the annual suggestion to dress in Dickens-era attire and bring along old-fashioned lanterns.

A committee begins meeting in October each year to organize the many elements of the event to ensure that it goes off

without a hitch.

The Salvation Army Band has accompanied carolers for several decades.

In 2004, after more than three decades as master of ceremonies, Billie Lucas announced his retirement. The following year, then-Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Gary Grote asked Town Historian Robert Lowell Goller to take over the Carolcade microphone.

Thanks to technology, the voices of Carolcade have reached beyond Main Street over the years.

"It is alleged that this group sang carols over the police radio," noted a caption under an Advertiser photograph of carolers from the second annual event in 1974. "The rumor was neither denied nor confirmed by local authorities."

Of course, the melodic sounds of more recent Carolcades have spread even further thanks to hundreds of livestreams and videos on social media.

The annual event garnered even wider attention in 2020 after a film crew came to Carolcade the previous year to capture scenes for the ION network's Christmas movie, "A Royal Christmas Engagement."

Carolcade has also faced challenges over the years.

In the mid-1990s, after hearing complaints about the closing of Main Street on a Saturday so close to Christmas, some members of the Village Board suggested moving Carolcade to another location, perhaps Hamlin Park. However, that idea didn't go over well. East Aurorans, it seemed, wanted to carol under the nostalgic holiday lights of Main Street.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the traditional singalong could not go on as planned in 2020. However, the Chamber

of Commerce arranged for a pre-recorded television special. And at 7 p.m., on the traditional Carolcade night, Goller and Don Vidler, decked in their Carolcade attire, live-streamed Christmas carols from the roof of Vidler's to keep the official Carolcade streak alive.

The crowd has grown significantly over the past five decades. By the mid-2000s, Carolcade attendance had blossomed to over 2,000.

"I'm thrilled," Ed Vidler said in 2005, noting that the East Aurora caroling event was probably the largest of its kind in Western New York.

Since then, attendance has doubled to an estimated 4,000.

In fact, the crowd had grown so large that in 2016, Vidler's submitted the event for a Guinness World Record, under the category "most people caroling (outside)." East Aurora has not been able to break the official record, however. The nature of the event does not allow organizers to verify the attendance in accordance with the Guinness Book of World Records' strict guidelines.

However, according to Goller, focusing on the world record and the size of the crowd shouldn't overshadow the real reason a few thousand of us gather on East Aurora's Main Street each year at Christmastime: To celebrate the season with our families, friends and neighbors.

"There are still places in this world where people are not allowed to gather in the town square," Goller wrote in a social media post prior to the 2016 Carolcade, "and in many towns there is no longer a town square in which to gather. Let's never take for granted our Main Street, our wonderful community and our ability to gather and sing together."

**Article by Robert Lowell Goller,
originally published in the *East Aurora Advertiser*
50th anniversary songbook, 2022**