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Don't wait until Christmas for the perfect table cover

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

Most people would agree that now is not the time to be decking the halls with boughs of holly. Nor is this the season to be jolly. For that matter, isn't it a bit too hot outside to be celebrating with a "blazing yule"? On the other hand, for many vintage tablecloth lovers, collecting Christmas-themed table linens is a year-round activity. And there is no better time than now to get a head start on the holiday season, according to longtime collector Jimmie Bucci.

Beginning in the 1930s and stretching into the 1970s, "tons of companies" manufactured Christmas tablecloths to suit every taste and holiday decor, Bucci said. With a tablecloth to fit every budget, Christmas linens, sometimes in boxed sets with matching napkins, were sold at a range of shops, including high-end department stores. A popular size was an oblong tablecloth measuring 54 by 62 inches, suitable for either a kitchen or dining room table. Square cloths measuring approximately 36 by 36 to 52 by 52 inches were perfect for a hostess' card table. Designs ranged from traditional to whimsical in nature. The best tablecloth was used on Christmas Day.

As family life in America changed and became more informal, a freshly ironed tablecloth was no longer a priority. But decades later, the status of tablecloths seems to have been elevated as people rediscovered these examples of kitchen textile art. In the summer of 2002, the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club (VTLC) was formed. And thanks to dedication and perseverance, the online club remains active, providing support to both new and seasoned tablecloth aficionados.

As president of VTLC, Bucci noted that even though Christmas carols might not be on their playlist, many antique malls are celebrating "Christmas in July." Yard sales abound with out-of-season offerings. And a recent check of eBay listings revealed nearly 8,000 "vintage Christmas tablecloths" for sale. Starting a new collection or adding to an existing one might be the perfect antidote to the summertime blues, he suggested.

Fortunately, starting a collection of vintage holiday-themed tablecloths need not be an expensive undertaking, Bucci



Above: How many days till Christmas? Hurry, Santa!

Below: To use or not to use? Collectors have a decision to make.



continued. A decent cloth with a typical design (poinsettias, candles, and holly, for instance) can be found for as little as \$10. On the other hand, many serious collectors consider a Calaprint tablecloth that depicts cheery snowmen (and women) to be the "holy grail" of Christmas tablecloths. "It could sell in the range of \$200," Bucci estimated.



Above: An example of a German-made Christmas tablecloth.

Below: Does anyone believe that Santa makes his deliveries in a hot-air balloon? When it comes to vintage tablecloths, the more whimsical they are, the better.



Another highly prized example is a stylish cloth designed by Pat Pritchard. Its memorable graphics, which include a "hip" Santa, coy reindeer, and a wassail bowl, pop, thanks to a color scheme of black and white, metallic gold and pink. In good condition, one on which the gold metallic is intact, could easily sell for \$300. Somewhere in between are interesting (and amusing) choices; among Bucci's favorites is a tablecloth that pictures a jack-in-the-box Santa,

his head on a spring, with the elves looking on.

Among those linen companies that produced what are now collectable tablecloths are "Willendur" (renamed "Willendure" in 1959.) Makers of a Christmas tablecloth that stretches 102 inches long, the company is valued for linens that do not fade. Bucci added

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Christmas Tablecloths

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that sometimes, the only indication that a Willendur (or Willendure) tablecloth has been used is a frayed label. California Hand Prints, another favored manufacturer, marked every one of the tablecloths with a cloth label. Identifying them is complicated if the tag was removed. And because "vintage" now extends into the 1970s, Christmas table linens by Vera now fall into this category.

Understandably, the condition of vintage tablecloths may vary, therefore affecting its value. Buccì said that many decades-old linens can be found in mint condition, saved for a special occasion that never occurred, or put aside in a cedar chest because it was too nice to use. As a result, he said that estate sales are often a good place to find tablecloths in excellent condition. On the other hand, others have been the backdrop for many family holiday gatherings and might have residual stains and tears. Buccì credited members of the VTLC with sharing methods to restore soiled tablecloths that are in otherwise good condition.

Which brings serious collectors to the question: To use or not to use? When a tablecloth is found in mint condition with a paper tag, "you have to decide if you're going to keep it that way or use it as it was originally intended," he said.

Like other popular collectibles, vintage Christmas tablecloths have been (and are being) reproduced. But for the seasoned collector, there are ways to help identify those that are not originals. The cotton fabric that was used to make early tablecloths feels heavier than the fabric of newer ones ("you can tell by feeling it," Buccì said). Additionally, while new tablecloths are seamed on all four sides, only two sides of older cloths were stitched, with selvage edges on the other two. There are subtle differences as well. Sometimes, what was black on the original cloth appears to be brownish on the copy. And finally, reproduction tablecloths often fade with the first washing. Buccì said he doesn't have a



Above: Tablecloth collectors might find this Swedish example a conversation starter.

problem with using a reproduction tablecloth as long as it is recognized as such. "Just don't expect it to last."

Even after years of collecting, there are still new discoveries to be made. Although Buccì has seen tablecloths with wisemen, angels, and twinkling stars, "I've never seen one with the nativity scene."

But if it's out there, rest assured that members of the VTLC will track it down. Buccì explained that to date, club members have identified some 183 different patterns on its online database, one that lists more than 3,000 tablecloths by name, pattern type (be it, for instance, an overall design), theme, and keyword.

Today, vintage Christmas tablecloths are an easy way to decorate the home throughout the holiday season. Buccì continued that these tablecloths are

suitable for use on both kitchen and dining room tables. "I definitely have enough that I could do a different one every day, beginning when Thanksgiving is put away." If a cloth is too small to cover a table, he suggested layering it diagonally over a solid-colored cloth. Folded tablecloths can double as dresser scarves or table runners, used on a coffee table or at the foot of a bed. Regardless of where and how they are used, vintage Christmas tablecloths "add a touch of hominess that fits in with the holiday." What else would you expect from the president of a club whose stated mission is "Making the world a cozier place, one table at a time?"

vintagetableclothsclub.com



Above: "Christmas Tree Lane" by California Hand Prints. A stunning pattern, this tablecloth was produced in five different colors, with pink being the most difficult to find.



Above: Dubbed "The Night Before Christmas" by tablecloth lovers, this popular design has often been reproduced. Images courtesy of Jimmie Buccì



Above: Reeking with style, this tablecloth, designed by Pat Pritchard, could easily sell for \$300.



Above: Many consider this tablecloth, made by Calaprint, to be the "best of the best."



Above: This Christmas display by Tim Eigenfeld took second place in a contest sponsored by the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, which offers educational activities, friendship, and fun.

Below: Wouldn't Christmas brunch taste better if served on this lighthearted tablecloth?



Below: Reversible vintage tablecloths (Christmas on one side, "Happy Birthday" on the other) are a bit wrinkled, in light of the fact that they are made of plastic.