

A Short History of Tea Parties

Hello, my name is Ben Brown, Director and Curator of the Clarke Museum. Mark your calendars, members and supporters of the museum are invited to our annual holiday tea party on December 9th from 1-3 pm at the world-famous Ingomar Club in the Carson Mansion. In preparation for that, we wanted to share a bit of history of the social phenomenon known now as a tea party, which has its origins in the Victorian period, a time near and dear to the early history of Humboldt County.

While nowadays tea and England are seen as inseparable as pumpkin spice and autumn, it wasn't always that way. Tea was traditionally grown and cultivated in Asia and arrived in England via trade routes, however in the early 1800s, tea was being cultivated in England, which dropped the price. As with many trends, tea parties started with the royalty. Traditionally, meals in England were eaten twice a day: Breakfast in the early morning and dinner around 8 pm. The Duchess of Bedford, who happened to be a close friend of Queen Victoria, began ordering tea and snacks in the early afternoon to fend off what she called a "sinking feeling." The afternoon snacking session grew when she began inviting friends for tea and gossip and the idea caught on like wildfire. With Queen Victoria's attendance at some of these teas, they became staples of society and were mimicked with modifications by the middle and lower classes, creating a myriad of tea events such as:

- elevensies: not only for hobbits, this is England's morning coffee time
- meat tea or high tea: served when people came home from work and included multiple courses of heartier snacks with tea
- afternoon tea: afternoon casual snacking and tea time
- cream tea: Tea with scones and clotted cream, the most basic of teas
- royale tea: Tea served after champagne or before sherry

Etiquette writers in true, social structuring fashion, took on the trend and devised books of rules on how to behave before and during tea parties, including how people are invited, how to RSVP, who serves what, and if servants should or should not be present (after all, you wanted to be sure they didn't hear the gossip that was being passed around during the party).

While tea hasn't become as ingrained in America as it is in England, the concept of a tea party has made it into the American imagination through books like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which originated right around the same time as the idea of people hosting tea parties.

Tickets for our upcoming holiday tea party on December 9th at the Carson Mansion may only be purchased by Museum members. This year, we're excited to announce that outfits from Mrs. Carson and Hettie May Wilson will be on display. For more details, please visit our website at clarkemuseum.org, give us a call at 707-443-1947, or visit us in person at 240 E street in Old Town Eureka.