

## The History

The Ahwahnee was completed in 1927. Yosemite Park and Curry Company President, Donald Tresidder, envisioned a Yuletide celebration in the new hotel's Dining Room. He hired Garnet Holme, a California pageant director, to create an "event", and The Bracebridge Dinner took its initial form, a performance loosely based on Washington Irving's sketchbook "A Christmas at Bracebridge Hall". Tresidder and his wife Mary Curry Tresidder played the parts of Squire and Lady Bracebridge.

Holme's untimely death in 1929 left a void in the direction of this new festivity. A cast member of the first two seasons – a part-time Valley resident who had played the part of The Lord of Misrule – was asked by Tresidder to take on the task of reworking the event. This cast member was Ansel Adams, who was well on his way at that time to becoming one of the world's finest photographers. Adams did a brilliant job of creating the basic form of the pageant as we know it today. His original script of the "new" Bracebridge Dinner has remained largely intact since that initial performance in 1929. A fine pianist as well as photographer, Adams' knowledge of music evidenced itself in the meter of his script, which was written with a feeling of four beats per line to reflect the four-beat music chosen for the male chorus processions.

In time, Adams took on the role of Major Domo, his unique personality bringing character and stature to this role, ruling over Squire Bracebridge's household and leading the presentation of larger-than-life replicas of each course of food down the aisle for the Squire's approval as the chorus sang. The rich voice of Adams' wife Virginia, who played the part of The Housekeeper for many years, brought authority to the role.

Adams brought Yosemite architect Theodore Spencer and The Hotel's interior decorator Jeanette Dyer Spencer on to the creative team to build the set for The Dinner. Mrs. Spencer, who designed the stained glass windows in The Great Lounge of The Hotel, created the magnificent window behind The Squire's Head Table and the rondels that hang in the cathedral windows of The Dining Room. The Squire's guests would little guess the "stained glass" is finely-painted parchment paper, carefully preserved through the years. Mrs. Spencer designed the original costumes and decorated the stage and head table that fill the alcove of The Dining Room. Her husband Ted designed and built the entire set. In 2000, Gregory Parker became the set decorator and began a new era of visual opulence for the Bracebridge Dinner.

In 1934, Adams asked well-known San Francisco choral conductor Eugene Fulton to lead the eight-member male chorus. Presentation of The Dinner was suspended during World War II and Fulton became Musical Director when The Bracebridge Dinner resumed in 1945. The musical aspect of The Dinner took on a new luster. A chorus of outstanding voices was assembled, and The Bracebridge Dinner's reputation for fine music was born. Fulton's wife Anna-Marie became the organist for The Dinner and accompanied the choral concerts that filled out the festivities of the holiday week. Mrs. Fulton also handled the ever-growing administrative details of The Dinner.

As demand for attendance at The Dinner grew, a second performance was added in 1956. Word of this spectacular event continued to spread throughout the country as well as abroad. A third Dinner was instituted on December 24 in 1978 and in 1985 two additional Dinners were presented for the first time on December 22, which allowed those who were unable to attend on Christmas Eve or Day the experience of this great tradition. Yet two more Dinners were added to the 2001 season, and to fill the ever-growing demand for tickets, 2002 marked the beginning of eight performances as word of this magnificent pageant continues to spread throughout the world.

In 1973, Ansel Adams retired from The Bracebridge Dinner and Eugene and Anna-Marie Fulton assumed the directorship of the pageant. Martha Miller became the liaison between The Hotel and performers, scheduling all aspects of Hotel activity and coordinating The Kitchen and Dining Room to keep the impeccably-timed performances running smoothly.

In 1978, after completing the dress rehearsal for The Bracebridge Dinner, Eugene Fulton died unexpectedly of heart failure. His family stayed in The Valley to complete the performances and the following year his daughter Andrea joined her mother, Anna-Marie, in the direction of The Dinner. Since that time Andrea has expanded the original vision of The Dinner. She augmented the existing role of Housekeeper to take the place of the part of Major Domo, which Adams and her father had played. She composed The Dinner's opening poetry to embrace the majesty of Yosemite Valley, created the candlelight procession that opens the performance, implemented the women's chorus, and wrote additional text to fine-tune the production she inherited. In the Spring of 2000, Fulton called upon George Baker, who played the role of The Parson, to collaborate in developing The Bracebridge Dinner even further. Baker, a fine musician and writer, brought his considerable skills to the newly-formed artistic team. The two created additional roles, wrote text to enhance the existing characters, reworked many of the musical selections and expanded the humorous aspect of the production. Fulton has always felt that the joy of presenting The Bracebridge Dinner throughout these many decades has been in the ability to look upon the production as a living theatre piece and to watch it develop and flourish. Melissa Wortman was hired to create new costumes for The Dinner and her opulent designs and vibrant colors abound, bringing the production's festivities into an even more fantastical realm of beauty. Scott Taylor joined the production team in 2007 to become the first official historian of Bracebridge Hall. With an extensive background in history and writing, Scott has taken on the daunting task of cataloguing eighty-three years of pictures and data in preparation for a much-requested book about The Ahwahnee's Bracebridge Dinner. In 2008, Dean Elsie contributed his expertise in Public Relations for The Bracebridge Dinner at Yosemite to further strengthen our 83-year reputation for reconnecting each guest with the spirit and enchantment of the holidays.

This year, Andrea Fulton is celebrating her 60th year of participation in The Bracebridge Dinner. During these 60 Christmases she has played many roles, starting at the age of five as a Villager. Her father created the role of Ward of The Squire for her, which she played for many years, then portrayed The Minstrel for 18 years. This year she celebrates her thirty-first year as Director and Producer of The Bracebridge Dinner.

As the production grows in scope, Fulton has created a team to assist with the producing of the show. In 2004, Fulton invited Margo McCarty to become co-Producer of The Dinner. McCarty, who has been with the Chorale twenty-three years, works tirelessly in this new capacity to maintain the professionalism and luster of The Bracebridge Dinner. She now co-produces The Dinner with Fulton. Michael McCarty, a cast member of twenty-three years standing who currently plays the role of Merrick, Squire of Bracebridge Hall, was asked to become the Artistic Director. Patrick Caley, Sarah Coykendall and Lani Spicer head up the technical team, working behind the scenes to fulfill every element of Fulton's vision for the production. The longevity of The Dinner's cast has created a remarkable sense of tradition and continuity. Conrad Walla is celebrating his fifty-first year with the show, with his wife Ann playing the role of Squire Bracebridge's mother. Many of the singers have been with The Andrea Fulton Chorale and The Dinner for twenty to twenty-five years and their personalities and voices have greatly enhanced the production throughout the years. The longevity of their participation endows The Dinner with its legacy of tradition and excellence, for indeed, the essence of The Bracebridge Dinner is its music. The Chorale's fine and dedicated performers and staff have enabled The Bracebridge Dinner to take its place as one of America's greatest traditions, one which the Wall Street Journal has named "the world's premiere Christmas Dinner". May this historic heritage endure to become an integral part of this millennium.

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Andrea Fulton  
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