

CHRISTMAS YEARS AGO

By Clarence Lebsack

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As it is now, Christmas was always a happy time. The emphasis was not so much on gifts, and of course it was not as commercial as it is now.

We didn't have a radio until I was about fifteen years old [*about 1929*], there was no television, our only newspapers were the Sterling Advocate and the Cappers Weekly. At Christmas time Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck catalogs got more attention than any newspaper. Boys looked at coaster wagons and skates--girls at dolls and doll buggies--but generally the Christmas gifts were a pair of gloves, a tie, or stockings.

There were school Christmas programs just before vacation time. Church Sunday School programs were generally held on Christmas eve. Most children of grade school age participated in the Sunday School programs, they consisted of recitations by the small ones and dialogs by the upper grades with the singing of Christmas carols by all. A few families had phonographs and could play and listen to Christmas carols. Others had sing carols if they wanted to hear them.

Christmas Eve day was almost a holiday inasmuch as we did only the necessary farm chores, the rest of the day was spent preparing for the evening Sunday School program. With a family of ten children our parents had an all-day job getting us ready for the evening and also making preparations for the Christmas dinner the next day.

One of the events of Christmas eve before going to church was the reading of the Christmas story from the Bible by Father, then we were all bundled up in warm clothes and drove to the church. The earliest Christmas that I can remember was about 1919 or 1920. Church at that time was held in a one-room school house about eight miles from where we lived. We had a two-seater spring wagon, we smaller ones were bundled up and bedded down on straw and blankets on the floor behind the rear seat. Although the night was cold and we could hear the sounds of the horses hooves on the frozen ground for what seemed like hours, we were warm on our bed of straw and blankets. I can remember the dim light from the kerosene lamps on the walls of the little one room school house, and glowing light from the candles on the tree seemed to warm the room. The tree in that small building seemed huge, it almost reached the ceiling and was large compared to the three or four footer which we had at home.

There was no electricity on farms at that time so the Christmas decorations were limited to indoors, there were no beautiful outdoor lighting projects such as we have now. There was no indoor plumbing, water had to be carried in from the pump which had to be thawed with hot water or a corn cob fire when cold weather came. The old outhouse was a necessity whether it was summer or 30° below.

The central heating system was a wood and coal burning stove in the center of the living room. Rooms around the outer perimeter of the house were generally cold. The heater was

banked at night (filled with coal and the draft closed). The fire would burn slowly all night and when coal was added in the morning and the draft opened up, the fire would soon be roaring and the old iron pot-belly would be red-hot in a short time. This was our method of thermostatic control. The bedrooms would be so cold, by morning you could see your breath, so when you got out of bed you'd grab your clothes and head for the heater to dress. Occasionally you would hear a scream and an "ouch" and you knew some one had gotten too close to the stove while stooping to put some clothes on.

At the Church program we each received our bag of candy with a popcorn ball or an orange. I am sure we would have gotten the bag of goodies anyway, but we were threatened with going home empty handed if we did not memorize our Christmas piece and present it properly before the critical parent audience.

When I mention properly, this included walking on stage quickly and softly, clear your throat, bow, recite faultlessly, bow and return to your seat without giggling. If you did not bow before reciting you were reprimanded on the spot, and by then you had forgotten what you were going to say. So there you stood, knee pants on, black stockings with knots of long underwear making your legs look like a stocking filled with corn cobs, and a bow tie almost large enough to hide behind, and you wished you could. By the time you got back to your seat some of your good friends maneuvered things around so you had to sit beside a girl, and that spoiled the whole evening because only a sissy sat next to a girl.

Getting back to the Christmas tree, there were no ornate decorations, except maybe a star and little angel clear at the top. The decorations were made of cotton, popcorn strings and cranberries strung on a string and candles clipped to the branches. The candles were a fire hazard and many fires were started by them. I remember one time at a school Christmas program Santa Claus reached across a burning candle and caught his sleeve on fire, by the time the fire was beaten out the little ones recognized Santa as Denzel Pyle [*a neighbor of the Lebsacks*].

It seemed like Christmas was always very cold. In those days there were numerous ponds in the area, which have since been drained, that made good skating. Christmas and New Year's day were skating days. One New Year's day I and my brothers [Jake, Fred and John] and Ray and Denzel Pyle rode our horses to Proctor. The South Platte River was frozen over solid and we skated almost to Iliff and back to Proctor that afternoon [*Iliff was about 7 miles from Proctor, and Proctor was about 3 miles from their home*]. When we started home it was nearly dark, and our horses were cold and frisky. I'll always remember that as the coldest horseback ride I ever had.

Unusual happenings always make an impression on young minds. One thing that comes to mind so vividly is killing the turkey the day before Thanksgiving and Christmas. Dad would hang the live turkey from the cross arm of the windmill with head down, and using a sharp scalpel would cut the bird's jugular vein through the mouth. This was supposed to be humane an insured proper bleeding. It seemed gruesome and cruel but we were assured by Mother and Father that the Good Lord provided the turkey for nourishment and sustenance and it was meant to be that way. Anyway by the time the turkey reached the table we forgot about the unpleasantness of killing the bird.

Holiday diets and menus haven't changed much, but methods of preparation have. Turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, raisin stuffing, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie with real whipped cream. The pie filling and cranberry sauce did not come from a can, they came from pumpkin roasted in the oven and from a bag of cranberries properly prepared. There were all kinds of home made bread. Diene kuchen (flatbread loaf), kirsche kuchen (cherry coffee cake), riffle kuchen (similar to kirsche kuchen but without fruit topping), saaft kuchen (flat loaf with syrup topping). This was a basic holiday menu with fudge, divinity and peanut brittle added.

Good old days? Nice to remember and we were happy, but I'll take today, it's much nicer.

Italics added by Tom Lebsack, November 2008.