

“Memories of Christmas When I Was a Child”

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My grandparents on both sides, my mother’s and father’s parents came from Germany. My mother’s family came from a place near Hamburg. My father’s family came from Austria, somewhere around Vienna.

Dhyan wanted to know about Christmas.

December 5th Santa Clause

It was the ritual in Germany that Kris Kringle came on Dec. 5. And they set out their wooden shoes and he would put candies and little stuff in them. They didn’t have a Santa Clause on Christmas Eve.

Anyway, when I was little my parents carried out a little ritual and on the fifth of December, somewhere in the evening, he would come and BEAT on the house, with something, it sounded like a big hose or something, and he really beat HARD. WHAM! I would nearly jump out of my skin!

You said that your mother made the Santa Clause suit that the whole town would use?

That’s right. When I was little, she made this Santa Clause suit and everybody in whole town used it.

Was it red?

Yes, it was red. It was beautiful. Red cloth with big cotton trimmings on the sleeves and everything. And so they would open the door and he’d come in. And he was Gruff! Roaring sort of. Ask us if we’d been good and ask us everything about Christmas. Anyway after he had finished his tirade, he had a bucket with him full of candy....

A bucket?

... which he would throw on the floor! ‘Course I realize now that my mother must have scrubbed that floor within an inch of its life because she knew he was coming. A bucket like this – about 12 inches tall, full of Christmas candy and

stuff. And he would just throw it on the floor! and say "Merry Christmas!" and stalk out. And that was the December 5th ritual.

And then on Christmas day did you eat at your house or your grandparent's house?

I don't ever remember eating at our grandparents' house. We used to change up with Uncle Will and Aunt Lena. They used to come to our house and we used to go to theirs for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

What did you have to eat on those days? What was Christmas dinner?

A lot of times it was goose.

With stuffing?

Yes, with stuffing.

Regular stuffing? Didn't you say your Dad liked Oyster stuffing?

Yes, he did but nobody else cared much about it so mother would often fix a little part of the stuffing for him because he liked it. And sometimes we had ducks. Sometimes during the depression we would have two ducks in place of the goose. And the Catholic school used to always have a big bingo before Thanksgiving and the prizes were turkey, goose, ducks... things like that.

Did you tell me your Dad used to try to win a turkey for Thanksgiving from bingo?

Yea. Oh, yea, he did. He always went and he usually came home with something.

Did you have things that had been canned from the garden for Christmas dinner?

Yea, probably green beans but one thing I remember is that mother made a wonderful oyster casserole. Kind of like scalloped potatoes except it had oysters in it. Oh, it was so good! Potatoes and oysters and a little cheese, au gratin. She often made it at Christmas.

And we had cranberries, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a vegetable like green beans, and pumpkin pie. I don't remember any special dessert at Christmas time except my mother baked the BEST fruitcake.

Did it have nuts in it and candied fruit?

The whole works!

Did she make it early and soak it in brandy?

No she didn't soak it in brandy but she made it early. Also she baked tins and tins of cookies.

What kind of cookies?

Sugar cookies and pfeffernesse, date cookies and some real hard ones that were some kind of European cookies. They were hard cookies!

Were they rectangular and kind of almond flavored?

Yes.

I know that cookie.

That's about it.

And Aunt Lena? What's the famous memory for Aunt Lena?

(Mom laughs.) You want the famous one?

Yes!

She'd say, "You can have butter or you can have jam. But you can't have butter AND jam on your bread." For some reason I always felt sorry for Aunt Lena. I didn't like her, she was mean, but ... I don't know.

Tell me what you remember about your grandparents. Of course, your father's mother, you didn't ever know.

I didn't know him either. He died a couple months before I was born. I knew my grandmother Bessert but not my grandfather.

Did you ever go to her house for holidays or just to visit?

No we didn't go to her house for holidays but we spent several visits with her before she died. And after the calamity, tragedy, what should I say? – they moved her to Montana where her oldest son, my Uncle Julius, lived. That's how she ended up in Montana.

How did your mother end up in California? I thought they were in Nebraska.

I don't know exactly how she got there, but I assume she had a friend out there. A friend or something.

Her mother wasn't out there?

No, just like me going to Washington, DC; my mother went to California and spent several years there. And she worked. Then when her mother got sick, she went to Baker, Montana, where her mother was, got a job there, stayed there and that is where she met my Dad.

What was he doing there?

He was working in this store that I can never describe... the dry good store, the general store.

How did he happen to be up there working at that store, do you know?

I don't know. I can't answer that. He was just there.

And your mother was working at the store too?

Yea.

We have picture, photographs of that store. With cans stacked in pyramids in the center of the floor.

Yes. Pickle barrels...stuff like that. From what I've read... clippings out of papers and things like that... it sounds like they really had been a popular couple.

That's about all I can say really. But do you want to hear about the divided town?

Sure.

Baker was a small town but it was divided in half by an old riverbed or something. From my grandmother's house I could see it. The only way you could get to the other side of town was this boardwalk that went right over the river bed. I don't know why it sticks in my memory but it does.

Do you ever remember water in the river bed?

No. As you saw in some of those pictures who were down in that depression so I don't think there was much water in there.

So on a typical Christmas holiday, would you get up, go to church, and then open presents? You would wake up in that room upstairs, and it would be cold, right?

Ohhhh, yes!

Did the heat come up through an opening in the floor?

Yes, there was a register right above the kitchen stove.

What was the room like?

It was a dormer. It had slanted ceilings and it had side walls. It was finished and it had rose wall paper and a tin roof, which was remarkable when it rained.

And you had a little bed in there and what else.

A bed and a dresser and throw rugs on the floor.

I bet you had lots of quilts and blankets.

Where were your clothes?

There was a little closet.

A window?

Yes, a dormer window. A nice dormer with two or three windows.

Christmas Eve was always fantastic. We always had our church children's program.

Did you get all dressed up?

Oh yes, lots of times I would have a new dress. We'd walk to church, it was quite a long walk and boy was it cold!

But your Dad wouldn't go with you?

No, and mother and Merle and I would go up to church and we'd be in the Christmas program. In later years, I'd play the organ for it every year. After that we'd come home. Sometimes we'd have fruitcake or something and then we would go to bed. Or sometimes we'd wait around for Santa Claus who never came. (laughs)

While you were up?

While we were up. But one year Mother and I came from church and there was a light in the living room window and I said to my Mother, "Did you leave a light on in the living room? It's cold in there!"

She said, "I guess so." So we walked in there and we caught Santa Claus! He was putting stuff on the tree and he had a big sack with my doll sticking out of it, you know. That was quite an event.

I bet! And what did he say?

"Ho. Ho. Ho!" He didn't dare say very much because it was my Dad.

It was your Dad! ☺ In the Santa Claus suit.

In the Santa Claus suit. *(returning to the previous story)* And then we'd usually give up and go to bed and about 4 o'clock we'd wake up (she and Merle) and we'd sit on the stairs and say, "Isn't it time to get up yet?" Then they were finally let us get up and we would have Christmas morning. Later we would have Christmas dinner either at our house or at Aunt Lena's house.

The meal was no so very different from what we have now. Turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a vegetable. Rolls. Relish.

That's about all I remember about Christmas except for one thing. My mother went out of her way to be sure that we had at least one thing that we really wanted for Christmas. The year I got that doll, the baby doll, that was my one present Christmas present plus clothes and socks.

How old were you when you got that baby doll?

I was seven or eight.

So she came the year that Santa Claus was in the house when you came home from Church.

Yea, she was sticking out of the sack.

With that lovely smile on her face!

Yes, I wish I had had her fixed before I gave her to you (Dhyan.)

Where would you have her fixed?

Take her to a doll factory where they would take the cracks out of her face and hair.

Well, we can still have that done. In the meantime, she is in my bedroom and she says "hello" every morning.

Long pause.

Dad: Is that the end?

Well I was going to comment that so many of the things we got for Christmas were made by either my uncles or my Dad. The doll bed that I had was made by Uncle Julius. The table and chairs, I think my Dad made. There was a little cupboard. Most of them were homemade. They weren't store-bought except for the electric stove and the little sewing machine.

They came one at a time as presents?

Yes,

Where did you keep them? Where was that doll furniture in your house... because it was a little house, wasn't it?

Yes, I think it was... oh gosh, I don't remember. But it could have been upstairs or in the basement. It was kind of dank and black down there but my mother put a piece of linoleum down there.

To kind of make a play house? Like you and Dad made a playhouse for us in one corner of the basement at 2804?

Yes. Yes.

Do you remember that year you caught Santa Claus. Was there any doll furniture that year?

No just the doll. I guess that's it! For now!