

Memories of Christmas past

We all like to reminisce and I'm no exception. I love to think about Christmases past because I was lucky enough to be surrounded by a loving family, have enough to eat, clothes to wear and a warm house in which to live. My maternal grandmother lived with us for 17 years. My paternal grandparents lived across the street. My aunt and uncle and two cousins lived behind us. With the exception of four years of following my father around when he was in the Army, I lived in the same house my entire childhood.

Every Christmas Eve was spent at our Congregational Church in Kewanee, when the children's program was presented to a huge crowd. After the program we went to the church basement for goodies to eat and drink, and Santa Claus always arrived to give us a gift. Our family has some interesting stories to tell about those days. One is about my brother and me, supposedly singing a duet in front of the congregation. I hear that while he was dutifully singing his part (he is three years older than I), I was smiling and waving to the audience, not singing at all. He kept nudging me to do my part and became more annoyed by the second, much to the amusement of the crowd.

Another year I was a shepherd — the beginning of woman's liberation, I guess, and I was told to act like it was cold that night of Jesus' birth. I remember walking down one of the three aisles rubbing my arms and shaking with the cold. What a ham I was — am — always will be.

One memorable Christmas Eve was the one when I realized that Santa was my father's first cousin, whom I had known all my life. I think that was the first dawning I had that Santa Claus was not all I had thought.

Before Christmas morning, there were no decorations or presents visible in our house. Of course, people didn't decorate much in those days. It was extravagant for times of economic depression. After the church program we would go home and drink eggnog and the excitement was just too much. I didn't know this for years, but after my brother and I went to bed, my parents put up the tree, wrapped the presents and put out any decorations we had. I always thought Santa Claus did the whole thing. All I know is that Christmas morning the tree lights were blazing and everything was changed and glorious.

A few Christmas Eve nights when I couldn't sleep, I would sit at the top of the stairs and all I could see was the glow of the Christmas tree lights, so I knew Santa had already been there. Our family never had a huge amount of presents. Not much stock was put into material things in our home, even if it was affordable. Every Christmas night we would visit the same family for turkey sandwiches and other leftovers and

I was always agog at the number of huge and expensive presents the children had received. I don't ever remember feeling envious. I just enjoyed playing with their games and toys!

When I was growing up, we did the same thing every Christmas Day. At noon the family gathered at my grandparent's house across the street and the women helped my grandmother fix the dinner, set the table and clean up. Grandma Andrews had a wood stove and that kitchen was always warm and inviting and smelled so good!! They had a fireplace in the sitting room, not the living room, with a fire blazing and the men were in charge of keeping that going and talking about issues of the day. My grandfather, father and uncle were all in law practice together and managed always to be civil and congenial, even though the three were different from each other. My father was the oldest of five children and quite reserved. My grandfather was the ultimate politician, outgoing and friendly, got along with everyone but never backed away from what he believed or a tough battle. He ran for office several times and was Mayor of Kewanee for 16 years.

Most of our holiday dinners we listened to my grandfather talk and he was always interesting and lively. My blond and blue-eyed uncle was also reserved and quiet, while my father had the blackest hair I ever saw and snappy dark brown eyes. My grandmother Andrews was painfully quiet and she didn't make a sound when she laughed. Her face just crinkled up and her shoulders shook. My three grandparents were very close, but I don't remember that they ever called each other by their first names. They were intelligent and well read. My grandfather Andrews would start to recite a poem or a famous quote and my grandmother Griffith would finish it. Or, it would be the other way around.

Now, as a grandmother, I look forward to my daughters and their husbands and children being with us for Christmas. My son will have to visit later. I haven't been able to give my children quite the same, consistent traditions as I had, but our family cherishes our times together. My mother is still living at age 96 in Sarasota and this year my brother and his wife will be with her.

When I was thirteen my father suggested I join the church choir, which I did, and I've sung in a church choir most years since. I never get over the thrill of singing at the beautiful Christmas Eve service at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Well, after all, it is Christmas. And church is the place to be.

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