Candlelight Christmas

Marge Isaak Miller remembers the Christmases of her girlhood, when candles cast flickering light on the tree. “I still have three antique clip-on candleholders that were attached to the branches of our Christmas tree,” she says.

The candleholders are at least as old as Marge, who was born in 1928 to Fred and Emma Isaak, descendants of Germans from Russia emigrants who settled in northern Mercer County near the Missouri River breaks. Marge, who was raised on the family farm, now lives on the farm that once belonged to her husband Donald’s family, just a few miles from her home place and located west of Pick City.

Lighting the tree was a risky maneuver in those pre-rural-electricity days, since any candle flames or sparks that came in contact with the tree needles could start a blaze. “In church, two elders stood ready to put out any fires,” Marge remembers. The candles were lit just before the last hymn, ‘Stille Nacht’ (the German version of ‘Silent Night’).

Other lighting inside the original Trinity Lutheran Church building was provided by hanging gas lamps.

Marge says the era of a candlelit tree in church came to a halt after the elders purchased strings of lights that could be wired to the battery of a vehicle parked just outside. “They started the car up so they could run the lights,” she laughs.

Church was an important part of the family’s Christmas. During cold weather when vehicles wouldn’t start, or when the roads were heavy with snow, Marge’s dad would hitch two draft horses, Jack and Queen, to the sleigh for the ride to and from church. During services (held in both German and English), men sat on one side of the church, with women on the opposite side and children in the middle.

Marge still remembers the first English verse she chanted at age 5 during one of the Christmas programs. It went:

“Ah, dearest Jesus, Holy Child,
  Make Thee a bed soft, undefiled,
  Within my heart that it may be
  A quiet chamber kept for Thee.”

After the program, the youngsters would each receive a bag containing an apple or orange, mixed nuts, Cracker Jacks, candy and other treats.

At home that evening after the service, Fred would disappear into the parlor. When the excited children were at last summoned to the parlor, they beheld the tree, festooned in glowing candlelight — a magical moment. After reciting the pieces they learned for the church program, the Isaak kids would open the presents “Santa” had left under their tree. “The gifts were usually homemade, like doll clothes. One year, my dad made me a little wooden cupboard, which I still have to this day,” Marge says.

Until her parents purchased a 32-volt string of Christmas lights, their tree was lit by candlelight. Like many farm families, the Isaaks had invested in a wind charger. “So we actually had electricity,” according to Marge.

To a point, that is. The wind charger blades were wired to a cluster of glass-cased batteries that in turn furnished electricity to the house and barn. When the wind didn’t blow, the batteries would lose power and lights would dim. Use of 32-volt lights, appliances and tools had to be curtailed at such times.

There were some things the wind charger didn’t do on the Isaak farm, however. For one, there were those
trips to the outhouse, which were especially miserable during cold winter

days. For another, the family stored ice cut from the Missouri River during the
winter in a building on the farm. Covered with sawdust, it usually stayed frozen until fall.

Marge remembers the day electricity came to the farm she and her hus-
band still share. “We were married in 1948 and we got electricity in 1949,” she says, noting, “It was won-
derful!” Their electric cooperative was Oliver-Mercer of Hazen (since merged with West Plains Electric of Dickinson to form Roughrider Electric Cooperative).

That very day, Marge and Donny went to town to buy a new electric re-
frigerator. Their next purchase was “a washing machine that you didn’t have
to crank,” she says.

That Christmas, the Millers’ tree twinkled with the family’s first string of electric lights. But just for old time’s sake, Marge clipped on the candleholders from her childhood. They were symbols of how far they had come. ■