

## Christmas

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### Email message from Dr. James D. Klein

According to German tradition, the first child to spot the pickle among the boughs on Christmas morning received an extra gift. The pickle ornament also represented the opening of the initial jar of pickles made from the previous pickle harvest. Traditionally, the jar was opened during the Christmas Eve feast.

The recent issue of "German Life" had an article on Christmas tree ornaments that indicated the pickle ornament was a tradition from mainland Germany. My question is: Does this tradition date to an early enough time period so that it could have been carried from Germany to Russia, and then to America as my GerRus relatives did. If my great aunt were still alive I would ask her if she just happened to give us a jar of pickles every Christmas, or if she was passing on a tradition.

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### Email message from Dr. James D. Klein, Walla Walla College, Walla Walla, Washington

During the 1950's my grandfather's sister, Barbara (Klein) Leno, traditionally gave our family a quart jar of her homemade pickles at Christmas.

In Germany, glass ornaments depicting pickles are sometimes used to decorate Christmas trees. Does anyone know the origin of the pickle ornament, and did it follow the Germans to Russia?

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### Email messages from Mary Lynn Axtman

The question about Christmas ornaments prompted me to re-read Joseph S. Height's section on Customs of Christmas and Easter in his book, "Paradise on the Steppe." A valuable reference for all Germans from Russia researchers along with his other two books and writings.

About Christmas trees -- the reason is simply that no evergreen trees of any kind could be found on the grassy steppes of South Russia. [And probably the same on the grassy prairies of the USA and Canada.] However, on Christmas Eve of 1828 Count Voronzov, the governor of Odessa, did have a Christmas tree in his residence. It was described as "a six foot sapling that was planted in a box of earth and adorned with a variety of artificial flowers and gift packages. The salon in which it stood was illuminated by a large number of lighted wax tapers that were placed on tables."

On St. Barbara's Day, (Dec 8) it was the custom to bring branches of fruit trees or sprigs of willow into the house, where they were placed in water, so that they might produce green shoots and blossoms before Christmas Day. This was regarded as a good omen of prosperity in the coming year. Some people planted various kinds of grain in boxes, hoping they might have some greenery in the house during the festive season.

About the gift of 12 Christmas ornaments -- I think that refers to ornaments representing the Twelve Days of Christmas (Dec, 25 to Jan 6). Each of these 12 days between the old year and the new year are known as "Lostage" (days of omen) associated with one of the 12 months of the coming year.

While I think it was difficult, if not impossible, for the early colonist settlers to have imported German Christmas ornaments in Russia, I suspect that they might have hung goodies like cookies, candies, fruit, etc in their homes at Christmas.

The G/Rs seemed to be able to adapt to their situations and carry on with the traditions that were important to them.

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### **From Chris Burkart**

By the time I was born, in 1944, many customs had become Canadianized. The ones I remember most of all are the cleaning so that everything was spotless, the cooking of icebox cookies, sugar cookies and fruit cake. Presents had been wrapped and waited for the tree to be put up.

About a week before Christmas, an evergreen appeared, and it was left frozen outside, until December 24th. That day, mom made poppyseed roll, bread, buns, cooked a ham, and butchered a turkey. Mom tried to serve us goose, but no one in our family liked it except Mom and Dad.

On Christmas eve, supper dishes were done, and presents were distributed. Almost all the presents were clothes, so we wore our 'presents' to Midnight Mass. After Mass, we came home to cold ham and buns with the hot mustard mom prepared from the dry 'Keen's' dry mustard.

When we got up the next morning, we went back to Church again - men sitting on one side with the boys who were not babes, and women on the other with the girls and the babes. After Church, bacon and eggs with homemade bread for breakfast, and a shot glass of rye whisky at everyone's plate.

The day was spent relaxing and family talk around the table or living room. We also used to have dried figs and a mix of nuts which people cracked open with those skinny little nutcrackers.

Supper was always a big meal with Turkey, Ham, mashed potatoes and carrots which mom put away in dirt in the cellar. There was no central heating in the house, so the only warm place was the kitchen and rooms nearest the kitchen. Like Cecilia said the other day, the men retired to the living room to talk, smoke and have a drink while the women cleaned up and sat at the table picking over the bones, which already didn't have much on them.

Cards were a big favorite or Checkers. What the whole feast was about, was the celebration of faith and family. It still is my favorite time of year.

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### From Elsie Dodds

Last Christmas I made up a William Hiebert Family History for my siblings. This included photos of every family and anecdotes from most of my siblings. My background was Russian Mennonite. My parents and three children came to Waterloo, Ont. Canada in 1925.

Reprinted below is what I remembered of Christmas:

"My reflections of Christmas go back to the depression days of the 1930's. There was no television then and few radios so people made their own entertainment to some extent.

Weeks before Christmas Eve, Mom was sewing new dresses for the girls and making sure the boys had good clothes to wear for the Sunday School Christmas Eve programme at church. My dress was always blue and my sister always had a wine coloured one. (My father would not allow us to wear red because it reminded him so much of the dreaded communism and everything it stood for.)

The snow made a crunching sound as Dad backed out the 1928 Whippet and the white clouds of our breath dissolved in the cold air as we all piled in for our trip to church. All of a sudden Mom said she had to go back into the house for something. Of course, we knew she was just making sure that Santa would come.

The church was a beehive of excitement as we prepared for our parts in the programme; old friends greeting each other, mothers fussing with their children and an overall air of warmth and good cheer.

Sometimes a child would forget his lines or sing off key but the parents beamed with pride as we presented the Christmas programme guided by our teachers. When the evening's entertainment was over, each of the children was presented with a brown paper bag of treats (candies, chocolates, nuts, a large orange and usually a little gift.)

On arriving home, we were greeted with another surprise - we found that Santa had visited our house and left presents for us. We had great fun opening all our gifts. There was also another treat in store for us and that was we could each have a piece of HALVAH. Then we would probably get into our bag of goodies before we went to bed.

On Christmas Day we children had settled down somewhat as we played with our new-found treasures. The aroma of good things cooking in the kitchen (usually chicken roast with aniseed) seeped through the whole house. These were some of my good memories of Christmas.

As time went along and we had children of our own it became a tradition to visit Mom and Dad on Christmas Eve. They are not with us now but the memories of Christmases past will never die.

Treasure your memories -- Elsie"

### From Ren Frederking

Hi Jim Heilman: I have been lurking with interest to the conversations re Christmas customs etc. Your Christmas church recitations and songs reminded me very much of ours in AB. Canada in the 20's., the only difference being that we also had a Christmas concert in school. We had Christmas songs with choruses, and solos as well

as recitations and some comic plays. In my first year in school I was asked by my teacher to sing "Away in a Manger" which I apparently did quite well because the audience kept applauding and waiting for an encore. However, it was the only song we had practiced so the teacher asked me "Do you know any other songs?" I replied, "Oh yes, I can sing O Du Froehlige", which I did! Well, it brought the house down even the English people in the audience applauded! Several people gave me quarters, even one 50-cent piece.

The pastor then asked me to sing it also at the German church concert several days later which I did with great gusto! This was in 1919 in a predominantly Ger-Rus community.

Other songs we sang in German were; "Ihr Kinderlein Kommet" and "Alle Jahre Wieder Kommt Dass Christus Kind" and, of course, "Stille Nacht". Great memories!

### **From Jim Heilman**

My favorite childhood holiday memories from the 1950's and early 60's are associated with Advent and Christmas services at Zion Lutheran Church in Eureka, SD. Unlike in most congregations today, singing of Christmas hymns during Advent was forbidden - only Advent hymns were permitted, which heightened my anticipation of Christmas. "O Come, O Come Emanuel" was sung every Sunday of Advent, and it remains one of my favorite hymns. Saturday afternoons were reserved for endless rehearsals of the Sunday School Christmas program to be held on Christmas Eve, part of which consisted of recitations in German, which were incomprehensible to most of us.

Christmas Eve services were glorious. They began with a procession of the children singing "O Come, Little Children". We processed from the church basement into the sanctuary and were seated in the front pews. As we walked into the sanctuary, we were greeted with the sight of two enormous Christmas trees on either side of the Altar - so large they nearly obscured the altar - covered with lights and ornaments. The obligatory procession of characters from the Nativity was part of the service. (One year, one of the poorest and least popular girls, and the object of scorn by most of us, was chosen by our pastor for the part of Mary. We were appalled. Only much later did I realize that no better choice could have been made to symbolize Mary than this girl.) At the appointed time in the program, each of us nervously recited our pieces, or sang our songs. The services ended with the singing of "O Du Froehliche", which most of the adults knew and most of the children didn't. I've never forgotten the sound of the old folks, most born in Russia, as they sang that hymn in their quavering voices.

After the service, we received bags of treats (candy, fruit, Cracker Jack, etc.) from our Sunday School teachers, and then my family and I walked to my Grandparent's house to open gifts. I never understood why Santa Claus always visited their house while I was in church.

Advent traditions are still the most meaningful part of the holiday season for me, especially here in southern Baptist country. On Saturday, we will decorate the outside of our house with Advent lights, and on Sunday, our church will recreate a 16th century Advent service (in German) done by Martin Luther. It will be fun to hear German spoken and sung again, albeit with a "Texas Twang".

### From Renee Knoll

When my husband was growing up in Colorado his family always got together on the Sunday before Christmas. It was a big family get together. They would make noodles all day for their Christmas dinner which had butter ball soup. One year some time later one of his aunts was having Christmas at her house and didn't have the time to have everyone over to do the noodle making decided to go buy her noodles. She bought the homemade kind from some one. That was the beginning of the end of a tradition in his family, as everyone thought that was great and they continued to buy rather than make their noodles. When they were together making the noodles they would cut the uneven ends off the rolls of noodles and put them in a bowl. The kids would run through the kitchen and grab some out of the bowl. Their parents were always after them as they thought they were eating too many raw noodles and it might mess up their little systems. He says it never did.

### From Cindy Mitzel Longtin

As remembered by Mary (Welk) Mitzel born 1913 rural Orrin, Pierce County, North Dakota: (Grandparents & parents from Black Sea area, Village, Selz)

We didn't put up a Christmas tree, mother had a large oleander plant (tree) in the livingroom that was decorated with snap-on candles, strings of cranberries and popcorn. We would lite three candles at a time for daily evening prayers and when Christkindl came.

I remember the excitement in the air and we kids running to the windows when we heard the bells from the horse harness and bobsled by the driveway corner on Christmas Eve. Belzneikel was bringing Christkindl along with 6 - 7 others singing Christmas carols up to the door and into the house. We kids had to wait in the livingroom for Christkindl to be presented.

Belzneikel usually wore a fur cap and long fur coat, rarely speaking to hide the person's identity. Christkindl wore a beautiful dress with a white net veil attached to a hat or crown over her head with many flowing broad multiple colors of ribbons.

As your name was called you ran from the livingroom to Christkindl to receive your gift and hurried back to the livingroom so Belzneikel wouldn't steal your gift away, which was always a fear.

To receive a gift was next to heaven. It may have been a necklace made of chalk beads or a handkerchief or in good years an apple or orange in a homemade basket. Mother would save colored paper during the year so at Christmas time we kids could cut strips and weave paper baskets to put nuts and candy in to give to each other. The basket would serve as a jewelry or treasure basket later. My older brothers would make piccolos out of tree branches.

Our parents would serve homemade chokecherry wine, cold meats, breads, kuchen to Belzneikel, Christkindl and the others before they were on their way.

Catholic practice was to fast from 6:00 pm until Midnight Mass which lasted two hours. The church would be decorated beautifully with poinsettias, Christmas trees and candles. We sang many Christmas carols all in German or Latin. The Priest would give each child a candy sack, rarely with fruit because there were so many children in the parish. Arriving home your appetite was tremendous but first we stood in a circle around the

table for prayers then we would stuff ourselves with pickled pigs feet, sausage, cold meats, bread, soup, kucha and cookies. We had to go to bed then and be up for Christmas day mass.

We celebrated the holiday with the immediate family because there were always so many children and the houses so small. During the season we visited our grandparents, aunts, uncles and many neighbors. Mother would fill a large brown sack with nuts and candy to take to the home where we'd go, the women would exchange bags. The kids played games while the old folks played Hearts, Whist, Penny Anti, and Poker.

Christmas dinner was always a large stuffed goose. Chicken noodle soup was served first having been prepared in the copper wash kettle for a large batch. Ham was served along with mashed potatoes, some kind of vegetable, bread, buns, cranberries, kucha and dessert was apple pie at our home. A special drink for we kids, mother would buy a bottle of Rawleigh's cherry flavoring and we would have our drink, a real treat. During the WWI years rye bread was made most often because white flour was scarce.

NEW YEAR'S was another day of anticipation. You would have Yulebakkers come round on horseback firing their shotguns into the air. Our parents would serve them homemade beer, wine and schapps. We would have beef and pork sausages, summer sausage, headcheese, pumpkin plagenda (? spelling), raisin and mincemeat pies. Breads, buns, and kuchen were always available.

May 1997 Tour members Loretta (Mitzel) Huschka and Mary Lou (Mitzel) Roller indicated that their mom, Mary Welk Mitzel maintained the traditions of her parents in their home. Loretta and Mary Lou remember being scared of Belzneikel but the excitement of the time kept you going to receive your present. Mary Lou recalls as a young child being so scared from Belzneikel, running to her parents bedroom, hiding under the bed, and getting her hair caught in the bedspring.

Loretta recalls being so excited to go to Gramma Welk's house, she made the best soups and how she would hang the long noodles on the backs of the chairs as she was preparing. Goose was the main meat at the Mitzel home too which neither liked and custard pie being dad's favorite was served at holidays for sure.

#### **From Janice Huber Stangl**

My father, Edward Huber, was born in 1907 near Hosmer, SD. He spent his early childhood north of Leola, SD. He is the son of Jacob J and Magdalena (Hoff) Huber and the grandson of Jacob and Rosina (Ritter) Huber of Glueckstal, Russia and Jacob and Magdalena (Ladner) Hoff of Kassel and Glueckstal, Russia. Today he lives in Bowdle, SD.

His first memory of Christmas in the home was a visit from the "Belzmoettl" [spelling?] and "Christkindl". Belzmoettl was outfitted in a big fur coat and hat with a scarf obscuring most of his face. He patted children on the head when he gave them some candy and nuts. Christkindl was disguised by a white bedsheet with a gilded garland around the waist and head. Christkindl also bestowed nuts, fruit and candy on the children.

One year my father was safely positioned behind the wood stove trying to keep toasty warm. When Christkindl appeared it startled him, even frightened him! He stuck out his tongue at Christkindl! The Christkindl promptly flicked him on his leg with a lean twig from near the stove. This incident gave him great awe and respect for the Christkindl!

When he was older he deduced that the big fur coat was his Dad's bear fur coat. It was several years more before he had identified the household's Christkindl--his mother!

It was later, in his adolescence, when there were several younger siblings in the household that they received visits from "Belzneickel" and "Christkindl" at Christmas time. Was this later, "Belzneickel" [St. Nicolas] a product of the growing Americanization of the older generations, or "borrowed" from their German Russian neighbors, who might have had a slightly different Christmas tradition from their village in Russia?

One of the Christmas traditions of my father's [Edward Huber] family that continued into my generation, was the preparation and presentation of the Church Christmas program. The event's excitement would start on Thanksgiving weekend, when the children were given their "spreckly" [a poem or bible passage] to memorize for the Christmas Eve event.

There was an air of grand excitement as the families gathered at the Church for the program. The tree in the Church [of my father's childhood] was adorned with wax candles that were lit. The sight was breathtaking for the children, since they did not have a tree at home that my father can ever remember. The Church was packed to nearly overflowing. The nearest water pump was about two miles away, but there was never a fire. The Guardian Angels surely were very busy!

As the program was being presented, it seemed that the older boys suffered the most. Their faces were flushed and one could see their pant legs shaking from their nervously knocking knees. Once they had recited their "spreckly" there seemed to be a great sigh of relief. Of course, the whole program was in German. The stars of the program were usually the youngest [about 3-4 years old] who had only one or two lines and had no trouble remembering their lines, but may have run off the stage when they were done.

After the program was over, every child in the Church received a "seckly" [small sack] from a pile that was under the tree. The sack usually had assorted nuts, candy and a piece of fruit. The tradition of the "seckly" was carried on in our Church until at least the 1960's. When we visited my parent's EUB Church in Bowdle, SD, on Christmas Eve, our own children each received a Christmas "seckly".

#### **From Bonnie (Zeller) Whillock**

I would like to forward this Christmas memory from my Dad, Roger Zeller, born in Heil, ND 1928.

Childhood memories, of church celebrations, at Christmas time in rural North Dakota during 1930's was a wonderful experience. I recall one year, after a severe snow blizzard, we had to attend the church Christmas program ... by a team of horses and sled. The country church was four miles from our farm, however, it took over an hour to travel the distance due to detouring the high snow drifts on the road. Since the pastor was unable to attend the program, as he lived in town fifteen miles from the church, the German service was conducted by one of the lay leaders. Each child had to recite a German piece. After the service each child received a small bag of assorted nuts, home made candy and an orange or an apple. These were prepared and donated by the ladies of the congregation. The congregation consisted of a dozen families. The church Christmas tree was donated by one of the farmers and home made decorations furnished by other families. Although there was a pot bellied coal stove at the rear of the church it was still necessary to wear a sweater during the program after removing the heavier coats. The lighting consisted of kerosene lamps that were mounted on the walls. The

program also consisted of various German Christmas songs by the congregation accompanied by a beautiful sounding pump organ. Everyone exchanged holiday greeting after the services and headed for home to see what Santa Claus had left at the house.

Mother had put the unwrapped gifts on the table while we were waiting in to share with my two brothers. We were so excited that we spent all of Christmas day target practicing against the side of the barn, then, picking up the BB's from the ground to use over again. The Christmas dinner consisted of roast turkey or goose with all the trimmings. Halvah as also put out to nibble on during the day as a special holiday treat in addition to all of the home made candies and cookies.

Incidentally, the little church we attended was moved and restored by the Elgin, N.D. Historical Society and is now a part of the Grant County Museum which includes an old train depot, blacksmith shop, barber shop and other buildings and machinery that were used many decades ago.

**From David Easterday**

Subject: Christmas Pickle

Folks in my German class were recently discussing a supposed German custom of the "Christmas Pickle." Apparently you can get pickle shaped tree ornaments but there must be more to it than that. Are pickles what children who have not behaved well get instead of candy and nuts? If anyone has good info, please share.

**From Eileen Landmann**

Subject: CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS

The story of the glass PICKLE ORNAMENT:

The pickle ornament was considered a special tree decoration by many families in Germany. There, the fir tree was decorated on Christmas Eve. It was always the last ornament to be hung on the Christmas tree, with the parents hiding it in the green boughs among the other ornaments. When the children were allowed to view the tree on Christmas morning they would begin searching for the pickle ornament. For they knew that whoever first found that special ornament would receive an extra little gift left by St. Nicholas for the most observant child.

The story of the glass ANGEL ORNAMENT:

Angels are thought to be intermediaries of God and our link to the mystical kingdom of heaven. Symbolizing purity, peace and love, angels are a comforting presence. It is said that they bring us news of peace through the coming of the Christ child, a gift from God for all people on earth.

The two stories were copied from the text that accompanied the ornaments I recently purchased. I have not varified the information, but the stories were interesting. Happy Holidays to everyone.

### From Virginia Becker Chapman

I have enjoyed reading the Christmas memories of other Germans from Russia. Most of them sound very familiar to me.

Here is a "Christmas piece" that I haven't noticed anyone else recall:

Der Weihnachtsmann isch a guter Mann. Er bringt die Kleina was er kann. Die Grossa lasst er loffa (laufen). Sie sollen sich was koffa (kaufen).

[Virginia Becker Chapman was a member of the North Dakota State University Libraries' sponsored "Journey to the Homeland Tour: Germany and Ukraine" in June, 1996. Her ancestral German villages of South Russia (today Ukraine) are: Kassel [Glückstal Enclave]; Worms [Beresan Enclave]; and Teplitz, Bessarabia.]

### Email message of 31 March 1998 from Bill Fife

Some of the last few messages have brought back long forgotten memories.

Church bells were common as a child on the prairies of Saskatchewan. I have not heard any for many years.

Oranges and ribbon candy given to us at church on Christmas, I had forgotten the joy it brought as a child.

Our family always attended church on Christmas eve and for some reason father and uncle were always late in arriving at church. When we arrived home Santa had been there. The tree was up and decorated with lots of presents underneath.

Today we get a tree that is so thick you can hardly see the center and it takes a half day to decorate it. When we were children the tree was decorated by my father in less time than it took for the church service.

The tree we had was probably scrawney and without a lot of decorations however to a small child the tree always seemed to be the most wonderful thing we had ever seen, with all its colorful decorations.

You sign on to a listserv to get information. As a bonus you get great memories. Ain't life great.

### Email message from Lloyd Friedrich

It seems that some people have pleasant memories of German church Christmas services. Here is mine although, it may be unusual.

In our little country church, it was the custom of each child to recite a religious poem in German. Each one would parade to the front and nervously recite what they had practiced for weeks. But the parents were nervous too because of the big "I dare you."

It seems that each year the big boys would dare someone to recite the naughty verse.

Eine zwei drei	One two three
Die Katze legt den Schnee	The cat lays on the snow
Der Schnee taut weg	The snow thaws away
Die Katze liegt in Dreck	The cat lies in the mud

Someone, always boys, would respond which resulted in embarrassing his parents, guaranteed no candy and tangerine orange and a sound spanking at home.

Of course, the offending brat was paid off with candy from the other kids because he was the hero of the night.

It happened every year even with stiff warnings from our parents before we left for the service.

These were good times!

#### **Email message from Carol Just Halverson**

Does anyone remember a Christmas delicacy called "bucks horn" or bucks harna (in dialect with a long A) It was a pod (with seeds) with a distinct flavor and had to be imported from (Turkey, maybe?) It was also known as "St. Johns Bread" because St. John the Baptist lived on similar food in the wilderness.

#### **Email message from James K. Krikau**

The Christmas Eve service reminds me of another tradition that may have some roots with Germans for Russia. As we exited the church after the service, all the children were given a bag of goodies - apples, oranges, and other food treats.

#### **Email message from Judy A. Remmick-Hubert**

Here is the story of Christmas Time from my mother, Lillian Hein Remmick. Her parents, Ludwig and Christina, nee Schweikert, Hein were both born in Borodino/Bess. in 1885. My mother grew up in Montana.

In 1943 we, my mother, my father and myself [Judy] moved from Montana to Lodi, California.

The following story was written for my booklet "A" to "Zzzz" of Borodino, Bessarabia, S. Russia: "C-1"

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The Story  
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At Christmas Time

by Lillian Hein Remmick

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Christmas was a wonderful time at our house.

The time I remember best was when we lived in the rambling old log house which- my brother has informed me- used to be the Lone Tree Fort. Right after Christmas we would start to save the foil from my Fathers tobacco containers which would be used the following Christmas to wrap the walnuts to hang on the "wiehnachtsbaum [Christmas Tree].

We would knot store string around a walnut and then crush foil around the walnut over the string thus making a silver ball to hang on the tree.

About a month before Christmas we would receive our parts which we would play in our church program on Heiliger Abend (Christmas Eve) in our small community all German church.

No one was too young or too old to take part. The very small would have only a few lines while the older children would have long recitations or dialogues. The choir would sing special German Christmas carols.

We would go to church on Saturdays and sometimes in the evenings to practice our parts. We always had new clothes for Christmas. Mother would sew our dresses.

One year Father came home with a whole bolt of plaid material so all of us girls had plaid dresses that year.

During the week before Christmas some of the elders of the church would bring into the church a beautiful evergreen tree so tall it nearly touched the church rafters. This tree they would decorate with many lights, tinsel, and other decorations using ladders to reach the top where they placed the christmas star.

I loved that tree and I'm sure the other children did, too.

The elders would also purchase a variety of nuts, candies, oranges, and apples. Using large brown paper bags they would fill each with mixed nuts, [page 142] candies, one orange , and one big shiny red apples.

These bags of goodies were placed under the church Christmas tree for every child on Christmas Eve that attended services from poor to rich no differences were ever made.

In the meantime Mother would be sewing up a storm and sing in time to the rhythm of the sewing machine pedal. She had a good voice and would often sing while she sewed. I loved it when she'd sing Russian songs from her school days in Borodino/Bess. S. Russia [U.S.S.R. ].

We made anise cookies and cut them in many shapes which we frosted and with a large sewing needle and store string we'd thread the cookies through the top and hang them on the Christmas tree.

I'm sure we must have hung other things on the tree but the walnuts and the anise cookies are a strong part of my memory because the sitting room, as we called it, where we placed the tree, would smell heavenly of pine needles and spice.

I used to love to sit near the tree on a window ledge and read as this was a quiet place and the tree smelled so good. I must confess I sometimes snatched a cookie off the tree.

In the central room on the first floor which was a very large room with a vaulted ceiling, which was probably used as an auditorium during the time it was used as the first school in the area, we hung garlands of red and green crepe paper from corner to corner tucked up to the ceiling in the center of the room. In the center as well as in each corner we hung an array of [page 143] large red and green paper bells.

Here we would play games when other young people came to visit while our parents would visit in the sitting room with both doors closed so they couldn't hear our noise.

Then there was Mother's baking. She would bake plain bread, fruit bread, more cookies and kuchen (coffee cake). We also had pies and cakes.

The brick wall (which Mother called a Mauer in German) which was about ten feet long and armpit high in the pantry was said to have been a gunnery wall during our home fort days upon which the men braced their rifles when shooting. Mother had painted it and used it as a cooling place for her finished baked holiday goodies which would be lined from end to end at Christmas Time.

Then at last came Heiliger Abend (Christmas Eve) [page 144]

[24th of Dec.] In the late afternoon Father would take the steel dust pan and placing in it sugar and cinnamon would light it and walk about the house until everything smelled of sugar and spice.

We were usually too excited to eat much supper and then everyone except Father would dress up in their new finery.

Father always stayed home because his part, and one he loved, was to put out all the gifts, which were never wrapped, under the tree.

Because we were a large family there was usually someone with some kind of illness and he/she kept my Father company .

A note at this point. We were never allowed to address our parents anything other than respectively "Father" and "Mother" ("Vater" und "Mutter").

So, most of us were off to church and traveled across crunchy snow on a very cold Montana night.

Sometimes it would be snowing and other times so cold and clear that sounds would travel great distances. On some nights by the time we drove home the borealis (a show of dancing lights that would put any modern fireworks to shame) had filled the sky.

From the hills bordering the valley the yipping and howling of the coyote packs calls and answers would reverberate.

Now, we were in church and every child was proudly sharing in the Christmas program. Then after the minister gave the benediction each child received a large brown bag of goodies. They were chuck full to the top leaving barely enough room to be tied.

Then home we went to find our gifts under the tree and another big brown bag of goodies.

We were very lucky children as we always received so much.

We were taught that our gifts came from Khristkind (Christ Child) from whom all gifts come.

The older folks would have kuchen and coffee while we children examined our gifts and checked to see our goodies in the second brown [page 145] bags.

Then off to bed because on Christkindtag (Christ Child's Day; Weihnachstag, or Christmas Day) we had to rise early and do our chores before going to church.

After church services, Father would usually invite guests for dinner which he loved to do.

Dinner usually consisted of chicken noodle soup, stuffed fowl, mashed potatoes, gravy, vegetables, a salad, a variety of breads and deserts..

After dinner dishes were done, we'd play with our new toys or go out and play in the snow.

We always celebrated Christkindtag for three days, at least so it seemed, as we always had lots of company and we never took down our Christmas trimmings until the sixth of January.

Most of our elders have passed on but they left us with a legacy of memories that are precious to the heart.

The following recipe is based on my Mother's kaffee kuchen [coffeecake]....

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This recipe and another on bread can be found at my website:  
[BorodinoBessarabia](#) under the section called THOSE WERE THE DAYS.

Thanks for being interested.

**Early Christmas Remembrances in Pierce County, North Dakota**  
**Email message from Mary Lynn Axtman**

Tis the Christmas Season and thought you might enjoy some Pierce County, ND Christmas remembrances written by my Uncle Joe. B. Voeller in his 1997 Christmas letter to relatives and friends. He was born in 1901 in the Berwick area of Pierce County, ND. He became the first Pierce County, ND G/R elected to a county elective position as Pierce County Superintendent of Schools in the late 1930's. His writings are so appreciated by his family & relatives. Enjoy.

Mary Lynn Axtman

I quote -- [not bad for a 96 year old man]::

Dear Relatives and Friends,

Writing without eyes is quite a chore. When you've finished, you can't edit what you write.

I am a year younger than the century. This year is 1997. I am 96 years old. Remembered years are 1912 and 1914. 1912 was the year of the first crop failure and 1914 was the start of the 1st World War. In 1912, I drove my first team of horses.

Christmas then was a matter of a bowlful of candy, nuts, apples and oranges. Sometime there was a toy or two, usually for a community of youngsters rather than for an individual child. One year, dad made a small pool table. The pool balls were marbles. Maybe I should feel deprived because I was never told anything about Santa Claus. We had Kris Kindle for good children and Belsen Nagel for the others. The Christmas tree came into being in 1920. We had no Merry Christmas wish like "Merry Xmas" but we did have a formal memorized New Years wish which we reported to our parents.....sometimes as early as 4 A.M.

About 1914 or 1915 a neighbor with two children my age moved from North Dakota to Texas. One Sunday a group of us teenagers decided to write to the Texas teens. We appointed a writer. The letter writer, pencil in hand, then asked, "How do you start a letter?" Our literary teenage expert came to the rescue. He said that you start all letters with this sentence, "I am well and hope you are the same." We finished the letter and addressed the envelope:

Mr. [Blank Blank]

Texas, North Dakota

The building I live in has 5 floors. The hall on each floor is about 1/10 of a mile. I walk this floor five times a day. When walking, I pass other residents. Most ask, "How are you?" no matter how many times I pass them. No matter how you respond, they reply, "that's great."

I have several answers. One time I said, "I died yesterday!" Back came the same words, "that's great." My stock answer is that outside of being blind, deaf and lame, I am in great shape. They say, "that's great!" Others ask, "how are you doing?" My answer is, "usually about 1 mile per hour." Merry Xmas and Happy Year!!

#### **Email from Jocelyn Iszler**

##### **Christmas at Hope Evangelical Church, Logan County, North Dakota**

While growing up in Logan county ND, my family went to a country church, Hope Evangelical, just a mile east of our farm. I remember the nervous anticipation I felt about the Christmas program on Christmas eve. The tradition was that starting about age 4 or 5 we were expected to say a "Piece". At that young age it was only about two lines to memorize. In first grade the "Piece" was a four-line verse. With each subsequent year another verse was added so by sixth grade it was a bit of a challenge. If you said your "Piece" well, meaning completed reciting all verses without noticeable "ums" and "ahs" you had then earned a Christmas sack at the end of the service. I don't know if anyone was ever denied their Christmas sack but just the possibility of such a humiliation made all of us try very hard to recite a perfect "Piece".

#### **Email from Barbara (Kuntz) Berentson**

##### **My Christmas memory on our farm near Drake, North Dakota**

I came from a family of 13 children and lived on a farm. The only time we all got to go along to town (Drake) with mom and dad on a Saturday shopping trip was when Santa Clause came to town. We were so excited. First we got to see a movie that they showed which was very exciting in itself. Then afterwards we all gathered outside as Santa came to town in the back of a truck and handed out bags of goodies. It was a magical time. As

we all got in the vehicle to go home and we're munching on our goodies, mom gathered up all the walnuts to be used in baking later on.

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**Email from Vernon Blessing**

**Christmas at the country church in McIntosh County, North Dakota**

At the country church we attended in McIntosh County near Wishek, ND. It was a tradition that the children present a Christmas program on Christmas Eve. After the program each child would receive, as a reward for his/her contribution to the program, a bag filled with Christmas goodies. That was the good news. The sad news was that for children from the poorer families: that was the only Christmas gift that they would receive.

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**Email message from Mary Ebach**

**Christmas memories growing up on the Ebach farm near Rugby, North Dakota**

Through the eyes of a child - if only the world would see Christmas that way. We were a family of twelve, so there were no lavish gifts exchanged at Christmas. Paging through the Sears catalog and dreaming, maybe, but yes there was an occasional doll. My god-mother always dropped off a brown bag filled with candies and nuts and an orange for me. But I was never wanting for anything - a pet dog or baby lambs or calf brought me happiness. The gifts we shared were the special cookies baked by our mother, the candy, the nuts and the lavish Christmas day meal and everyone trying to talk at the same time. The excitement of driving from the farm in the dark of night to go to Midnight Mass.

Seeing the church all beautifully decorated, and each pew packed with people, the crib set that we visited, the powerful choir singing the traditional Christmas hymns and some sung in German. After Mass and the greetings of the people, we went back home for more food prepared by a thoughtful mother - baked ham, potato salad, goladetz, pickles, halvah, head cheese, homemade bread, cookies and yes it was also time for some schnapps - it was Christmas - always in memory. Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night - Frohe Weihnachten.

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**Email message from Bonnie (Aichele) Schimke**

**Christmas memories at Tuttle, North Dakota**

It was Christmas Eve probably 1949 or 1950 in Tuttle, ND. My parents and I had finished our traditional Christmas Eve dinner of borscht with home baked bread, summer sausage, head cheese, liverwurst, pickled herring, cheeses, pickles, and salty black olives hand ladled from the local store barrel. Dessert was a variety of Mom's special holiday cookies, fudge, divinity, and halvah - a delicacy only seasonally available.

As a diversion for a 5 year old impatiently waiting for Santa, we all bundled up and drove to a large slough where my father had a trap line for muskrats and mink - a substantial part of winter income. It was cold but not windy and the moon was bright. I remember giggling uncontrollably as my mom and dad pulled me in circles on my sled across the ice. I don't recall if there was anything in those traps, but what a great surprise when we got home to find that Santa had been there while we were gone. It was a magical Christmas for me with long-lasting memories.