

Christmas Celebrations Long Ago

Irene M. Rader, Electronic mail message to Michael M. Miller from San Jose, California

Just as the celebration of Christmas has changed over the years for our children and grandchildren, we also celebrated in a different way from the way it was celebrated in Russia and in the first few years after our great-grandparents and grandparents did after arriving in this country.

One of the most obvious changes was that years ago, everything was in German, the songs, the church services and the language in the homes, up to and including the Christmases that were part of my childhood. We had to learn all of our Christmas "pieces" in German and all of the carols were sung in German.

Instead of talking about Santa Claus, we would hear about "der Belznickel" coming. When we didn't behave, we were reminded that instead of gifts, der Belznickel would bring coal in his sack. There were often threats of having to kneel in a corner on the hard coals if one displayed poor behavior. At our home we never had anyone come dressed as the Belznickel, but sometimes at a school program someone would dress up and play the role. I can also remember a few times when we would go to town to wait for Santa to come in early December. It was the town's way of starting the Christmas shopping season.

With the beginning of Advent, the preparations for Christmas began in our country church, the NeuGluckstal Lutheran Church, which was a mile north of our farm. It could be seen clearly from our farm because the landscape was flat and unbroken in that direction. Only an occasional early blizzard would wipe the white-steepled church from our view with the whirling snow. Twice a week the church stove would be coaxed into yet one more fire to warm the cold pews in time for the evening's practice for the Christmas Eve services. Only the men of the church were there to direct the singing of Christmas Carols and the recitations of our "pieces". These were poems based on the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus. Sometimes three or four children recited their verses in unison or in sequence if the whole poem was too long for one child to memorize alone. Even the youngest children were given parts, and these were often paired with older brothers or sisters. We would get a playtime break after about an hour. It was so much fun being able to play outside by lantern light with children that attended other country schools. We were always glad to get back inside to warm ourselves by the stove. The light inside came from kerosene lamps that hung on the walls, with a round mirror behind the chimney globe to reflect the light and make the room brighter. I thought they were the prettiest lamps imaginable.

However, on Christmas Eve, even these lamps paled in comparison to what awaited us as we entered the church. Up front, next to the organ would be the most beautiful tree, so tall that it almost reached the ceiling, decorated with glittering ornaments and on every branch there were real candles, burning brightly and scenting the air with a mixture of melting wax and pine needles. Sometimes some of the needles would catch fire, but one of the men always sat up front to put out the flames as quickly as they'd flare up. It didn't take long till all the candles had finished burning, so there wasn't any danger of a real fire starting.

All the children were dressed in their holiday finery, hair tightly curled or slicked back. We sat in the first two or three rows anxiously waiting for our part in the program. What had become routine and familiar during practice, became scary and unfamiliar when we faced a church filled with mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts,

grandparents and older brothers and sisters smiling up at us in anticipation of our yearly performance. Occasionally a shy child would have stage fright and forget a line, but there was someone on the sidelines prompting and encouraging us. After singing all of the familiar carols and some words of prayer, the best part of the evening for the children came at the very end. That was when each of us got a small brown paper sack filled with hard candy and nuts. Way down in the bottom was an apple and an orange. We could hardly wait to get home to empty our goodies on the dining room table to take stock of the contents, finally being able to pop one of the ribbon candy into our mouths. We'd have to get to bed soon afterwards, so we would be ready for church services again on Christmas Day. It was a good feeling to know that we had made our parents proud of us with our songs and verses we'd learned for this one special night of the year.

The next morning after church we would get our Christmas gift from our parents. During the depression, these gifts, especially in a large family like ours, were small or practical. I remember one year our mother sewed new dresses for our old dolls'. That was the only gift we got that year. One year our oldest brother had built a small play table and cupboard out of wooden apple boxes. He painted them white and the cupboard had a little pink curtain covering the shelves at the top. We got a little set of tin dishes to put in the cupboard. Many an hour was spent having tea parties and pretending to play house. We valued these toys and took good care of them. I don't ever remember feeling deprived. A few times we got games to play with. One was sort of an apple puzzle and one had to spin for a number that corresponded to a piece of the apple puzzle. The person to put the last piece in the puzzle was the winner. We also had a game that had sort of a dustpan shaped tray with holes in it. The holes were numbered with points to be earned by rolling small wooden colored balls into the holes. The person rolling the highest score was the winner. Although we were aware of the idea of Santa Claus, he was never the focus of Christmas in our home. Rather, Christmas was a day to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We would also observe the second day of Christmas. If the weather was nice, we would make a trip to visit my Grandmother Hieb, my mother's mother. She lived in Hosmer, a small town about 20 miles away. Because we were a large family, not all the children would get to go along. Those of us who were lucky enough to go along, would have to recite our Christmas "piece" for her. She'd reward us with lemon drops or pink or white peppermint rounds with x's imprinted on them. Whenever I eat this type of candy I think of happy Christmases long past.

Although Christmas is supposed to bring back happy memories it also brings back some very sad memories for me. In December, of 1939, our mother was very ill and had been in the hospital in Bowdle for several weeks. As young children we were able to spend only a few minutes at a time to visit her. The rest of the time we had to sit out on the hard seats in the small waiting room of the hospital. The doctor allowed her to come home to spend Christmas Day with the family, but she had to spend the entire time in bed. Although we had a tree in the living room, somehow the ornaments and tinsel didn't sparkle very brightly that year. I don't remember what kind of a gift I got under the tree that year. All I really wanted was for our mother to get well again. However, that was not to be. As soon as Christmas was over, she returned to the hospital. Perhaps with the medical advances we have today, she could have been helped, but at that time it was soon apparent that she would not get better. I remember that toward the end she could not keep any food down and she was too weak to talk much. During the afternoon of January 5, 1940, our mother passed away. I can remember all of the family gathered in the waiting room and they were crying. I didn't realize what had happened and Aunt Barbara, who was there, took me into my mother's room to show me that she wasn't breathing anymore. Only then did the finality of it all begin to register in my mind. I was just a little over eight years old at the time. After we got back home to the farm, I remember standing on the register of the floor furnace with my oldest sister, Irma, to get warm, as she tried to explain to me that our mother was never going to come home again. I know I thought I would never be

warm again, in spite of feeling the heat of the furnace coming through the register. A few days later she was buried at NeuGluckstal Cemetery. The coffin had been brought to the house before the church services. It stood in the living room overnight where only two weeks earlier the Christmas tree had brightened that corner. Even though Christmases came and went after that like they always had, I never looked forward to Christmas in the same way again. A lot of the joy and innocence of childhood was gone.

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