

Christmas at Fox Valley

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The practice of putting out stockings for Santa Claus was not part of our Christmas tradition at home. In fact, Santa Claus played no role in our Christmas celebrations at all. The Santa Claus tradition had not been part of our parents' upbringing either. Christmas was, foremost, a religious holiday in our home, and secondly, a highly social event within our family. We always got presents, but they were from Dad and Mom, or from a favorite uncle and aunt who lived in town, or from a god-parent. Santa Claus only entered my parents' home when their grandchildren came along. My wife and the spouses of my siblings, none of whom have German-Russian backgrounds, brought new traditions from their homes into our Weiss family.

When I grew up, the Christmas season always began with Advent. Advent was the time of the church liturgical calendar for quiet reflection and anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas was a celebration of this miraculous birth. And so it was observed in our Catholic home. As children, we were as excited about the arrival of Christmas as children still are today. We would spend hours looking through the Eaton's and Simpson Sears' catalogues. We knew that we would receive a present from Dad and Mom. These were usually mail-ordered gifts that Dad would pick up at the Post Office or train station during the day. By the time we came home from school, they would have been well hidden.

Besides the presents that children are always excited to receive, we looked forward to the special foods and the visiting of friends and relatives. Mom did lots of baking in preparation for the company we would receive over the Christmas season. There would be many of our favorite cookies and slices, but also buns filled with ham and bacon bits. There was also a variety of nuts and candies purchased for the Christmas season. We always had Christmas mandarin oranges and often halvah. Halvah is a rich confection made from ground sesame seeds and honey or syrup, sometimes with dried fruits or nuts added. In the good-harvest years, Mom would buy an entire metal cake-pan of Halvah, and would have to hide it until Christmas. It was fairly costly but Mom knew that this was one of our favorite treats, and for me it still is.

We usually had a Christmas tree that Dad bought in town. I remember all of us helping Mom to decorate the tree. There would be other decorations around the house, including the Christmas posters and drawings that we children had completed in school. The house was filled with the smells of baking. The house was given an extra cleaning. The week leading up to Christmas was a special time to be with Dad and Mom in our home. There would be fewer outside chores. We spent a lot of time inside playing cards (Schmier), cribbage, checkers, "Chinese" checkers (where you moved marbles around a board), and more cards. Finally December 24 would arrive. We opened our Christmas presents from Mom and Dad on Christmas Eve before we went to church. Often it was something we could wear to church like a new sweater or shirt or jacket. We always dressed our best for this occasion. After Christmas Eve Mass we would visit our uncle and aunt who lived in town, or we would go back into town for lunch with them on Christmas Day. Those were good times. There was always chicken noodle soup at Aunt Betty's place, and lots to eat, including Velveeta Cheese, which we never got at home. The adults would have a drink or two, rarely more, and it was always a loud and happy houseful when we were together.