CHRISTMAS TIMES

Most of us probably have fond memories of Christmas from our childhoods. Back in those innocent days, Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer were as real to us kids as our next door neighbors. Everyone seemed to know the famous Charles Dicken’s holiday story “A Christmas Carol” – with Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, a crippled Tiny Tim, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. And most adults in those days could recall at least parts of the classic poem “The Night Before Christmas.”

I grew up in a lower middle-class, mostly Polish neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, about six blocks from Rainbow Beach. Winters in this part of the country were usually quite brutal, with bitter cold, biting winds, and plenty of snow. Christmas and New Year’s Eve offered the only festive respites from those largely gray and dreary months.

We always had a fresh-cut pine Christmas tree, purchased a week before December 25 from a temporary sales lot on a nearby vacant city street corner. We reused our decorative, hanging metallic tree tinsel from year to year to save money. Our shiny glass tree ornaments and electric colored lights were typical of those used by most folks. Using thumbtacks, I would sometimes affix strings of colored lights around the perimeters of our three front living room windows, then plug them in. There were also aerosol spray cans of simulated ‘snow flock’ for sale back then which were used on cardboard window stencils of Christmas scenes. We would buy such products and then decorate those same front windows with white wreaths, angels, bells, stars, etc.

Because our modest home didn’t have a fireplace, we simply placed our Christmas tree by a wall in our living room. I and my two sisters were told that Santa would not be coming down any chimney, but would instead place our gifts on the front porch, which was at the top of a tall set of fifteen wooden stairs. (Our loyal mailman, Kelly, must have bemoaned climbing those heights every time over many years!) And because we didn’t have a fireplace mantle, I cannot remember us ever hanging up stockings anywhere for receiving little surprise treats from Old Saint Nick.

In the weeks prior to The Big Event, kids on my street would pour over the Sears or Montgomery Ward or JC Penny Christmas catalogues, and compare items with their friends, and then circle their wishes for their parents to hopefully notice at relay to Santa. Naturally, of the dozens of items we coveted, each boy or girl felt lucky to get only one or two of those special presents.

Being a Catholic family, we usually went to the traditional Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at St. Bride’s Church, along with most of our neighbors. My older sister, Jan, sang the familiar seasonal carols with the choir in the upper balcony. As an altar boy (from 5th- 8th grades), I was often called to serve this festive but lengthy annual religious extravaganza, with wafting incense, a plethora of candles, rousing organ music, Latin prayer intonations by a trio of priests, and packed pews filled with devout parishioners in their wet-smelling (if it had been snowing) wool coats, hats, scarves, and mittens. Afterwards, we would stumble home exhausted but giddy, for we were allowed to open one gift apiece that night before going to bed, with the rest being opened on Christmas morning, after but a few hours of fitful sleep.

I mentioned earlier that our gifts were always mysteriously placed on the front porch by Santa, because we did not have a fireplace/chimney. This would happen every year during supper the night before Christmas Eve. My Mom would look at my Dad, who would get up from the small kitchen table, supposedly to “check on something in the garage,” as he went out our back door. After several minutes, our doorbell would ring. My Mom and us kids would rush to the front door, and -- lo and behold – there would rest a simple pile of colorfully wrapped presents! We carefully brought them inside and placed them under our Christmas tree. My Dad would suddenly return via the back door, and my Mom would say that “he just missed Santa,” and then walk him solemnly to behold the stack of gifts. Well, this pattern was unchanging – except for one year, when the doorbell rang while he was still eating his supper with us! He looked at my Mom and she looked back at him in return, somewhat surprised and puzzled, I thought. We all went to the front door together, and a pile of gifts was there, as usual. This baffling mystery – never explained -- convinced us kids that Santa really did exist.

The holiday always brought over the relatives, so special Polish foods and desserts were prepared for the various visiting aunts, uncles, and cousins. My Mom and her mom (my Grandmother, whom everyone called ‘Buscia’) whipped up roasts and potatoes and casseroles and sausages, augmenting the feast with holiday breads from a local bakery and a dozen different homemade cakes and cookies. In those days, fresh fruit was a rarity in Chicago during the frigid winter, and only a friend or neighbor who had driven down and back to Florida could offer us a single precious orange or grapefruit. I was like enjoying a juicy, sweet wedge of summer sunshine! It was a highly appreciated prize.

On our tiny black & white television back then, the evening news came on for only fifteen minutes, from 5:00 – 5:15 p.m. We watched John Cameron Swayze fill us in on the main events of the days from around the world (sponsored by Timex wristwatches – “…it takes a licking and keeps on ticking!”), then we switched to watching Garfield Goose with Frazier Thomas, which aired on WGN Channel 9. It featured puppets, cartoons, and kid-friendly live action skits. At Christmas time, however, this show always featured a Russian animation called “The Firebird.” This wonderful fairy tale completely fascinated me every time! I imagined that I was the Russian boy prince who wanted to catch the mystical firebird and pluck a single feather from it, which could then work magic.

Also on television during the days leading up to the holiday were special programs by singers Bing Crosby, Andy Williams, and Perry Como. The whole family enjoyed these, one of the few times we all watched TV together (apart from every Sunday’s Ed Sullivan variety show, year-round). My favorite songs were, and still are: “White Christmas” (Bing Crosby), “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” (Perry Como), “A Christmas Song” (Nat King Cole), “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” (Andy Williams), “O Holy Night” (Andy Williams), and “Ave Maria” (Perry Como). My favorite holiday instrumental is still "Sleigh Ride" by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra.

If it gently snowed with fresh white and fluffy flakes – not a howling blizzard! -- on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, it was a sign of good luck for the present and the future. This happened maybe once every three or four years. It was also fun to open up colorful Christmas cards from friends and relatives. I loved the manger scenes with the baby Jesus/Mary/Joseph and the angels; the Three Wise Men with gifts on their camels, traveling through a desert dotted with a few palm trees, following the star to Bethlehem; or the amazed shepherd boys in the fields guarding their flocks on that very special night of Christ’s birth. And if the cards had sparkling glitter on them, more the better!

Two popular movies capture some of my generalized memories of Christmas from my childhood: the serious “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946), and the comedic “A Christmas Story” (1983). Watching either of these films nowadays fills me with misty nostalgia.

So what were my favorite Christmas gifts that I received as a child? Well, if money was tight, my sisters and I got only practical items like underwear, socks, or other clothing items, with maybe some candy canes thrown in to help sweeten our disappointment. But more often than not, we each received one major ‘wish list’ item from Santa. Over the years, I fondly remember getting: a new dark metallic-green Schwinn bicycle (freedom and speed on wheels!); an American Flyer electric train set (I immediately set up the tracks in a circle under the Christmas tree, later adding a miniature plastic station and town); a Gilbert microscope set (perfect for studying insect parts, hair, leaves, and soil samples); a Gilbert chemistry set (with its Bunsen burner, I could melt yellow sulfur powder miraculously into a black goo – but I could sadly never make any explosives!); a pair of fancy Thom McAn house slippers called ‘Romeos’ – kind of like brown leather boots with elastic sides; and my first 2-transistor portable pocket radio with earphone, made in Japan. The Styrofoam-fitted box of the radio inexplicably absorbed the pine smell of the Christmas tree that year and retained it for many years afterward. Hence, I could even smell a faint Christmas memory during the torrid city summertime whenever I took the radio out of its box!

As you know, things change as you get older. Christmas has different meanings to an adult than to a child, yet it remains a magical time of faith and wonder throughout one’s life. It is a time – if only for one day a year – for believers to be at peace with everyone, and to give all of us pause for joy and reflection. And this holiday is the perfect time to remember a beautiful, fleeting part of one’s own childhood…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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