

Christmas Memories & Traditions

Eleanor Lake, Electronic mail message to Michael M. Miller of December, 2001

As a first-time contributor and a long-time lurker, some of the replies sent in to the suggestion of Germans from Russia Christmas Traditions were great.

I still laugh when I read Rod's writeup of his Fresno Christmas Eves.

Dorothy's memories about members walking to church (that could) and the dimming of the church lights when the congregation sang "Stille Nacht" on Christmas Eve echo our Christmas Eves. No church bands, though.

Except for Rod's seven-mile drive to church (thru the fog) our church had the same Christmas programs with memorized "pieces". Only we walked to church in those days. Like in Dorothy's memories, the majority of our church members lived only a few blocks away. It wasn't until the late 1940s when WWII was over and more cars available for transportation that the city walking lessened, even for a few blocks. There was a surge in Sunday School growth as more children were born. A lot of the old people died and their daughters learned to drive.

Way back, we kids in Sunday School memorized "pieces", a poem or a story, given out a month before, to recite in German or English in front of the always packed church. I don't think our Sunday School started "pageants" with costumes and different age singing groups until the 1950s. At the end of the program a red net stocking with the same contents as Rod described - orange, apple, hard candy - was given to each Sunday School child. Later, one generous member donated a box of chocolates for each member of the senior choir.

Until German was done away with in the church service, the Christmas hymns sung during the program alternated between English and German in my time. Later, when all was in English, I remember the Christmas Eve when a new minister having a flash of inspiration looking at the old people in the congregation announced we'd all sing, "Oh, du Froeliche, Oh du Selige.." (Excuse my garbled German.) There was the usual rustling as the congregation stood up, then, surprising the little kids, tears came to the eyes of the old people as they sang. Handkerchiefs suddenly appeared.

In Oregon you could obtain federal tree cutting permits. Just after WWII, several men in our family would get together on a December weekend and go up to a nearby mountain (federal land), chopping down one tree for each family. The last time they went, their borrowed truck got stuck almost irretrievably in the snow. When they finally were able to get out, there was a unanimous decision that each family could afford the \$1 or \$2 for a "boughten tree" from a neighborhood lot.

After Christmas Eve church service, we all gathered at a family member's home. Gifts were exchanged. When the family had increased, they changed to drawing names for gifts. A favorite recipe potluck meal was always included.

Christmas Day was another church service, but attended mostly by adults and few children.

Perhaps we city folk changed faster than people raised in the country. My family is widely scattered. The church building was eventually sold to another congregation and a new one for the church members built in the suburbs. We celebrate Christmas quietly many states and years away. Hopefully, churches somewhere still have the old Christmas traditions. But then, I think I'd miss those old people I still remember who started the first traditions in a new church in a country far away from where they were born.

Barbara Bohn, Electronic mail message to Michael M. Miller from Toronto, Ontario

Mom and Dad escaped from a Russia terrorized by Stalin and because of their courage, we children grew up free in Canada. Our parents left behind family and friends, but not their traditions – Christmas being the most special. Or so it seemed.

So my memories of Christmases past begin not in December but in November when Mom started her baking spree. She would sing Christmas hymns as she beat, stirred, rolled and patted the various doughs for a huge variety of cookies. As the sun would set, we could see the wonderful orange, red, gold and purple sunsets through the west facing window and Mom would say – “Look children, the Christ Child is baking”. She would say this in German of course, but I have no idea how to write that in the exact words she spoke. When I grew up and had my own children I would tell them exactly the same thing as I baked Christmas cookies and sang the old hymns.

Northeastern Saskatchewan was a winter wonderland (probably romanticized in retrospect because I also remember frozen fingers, noses and toes). There was always lots of snow and our farmyard was surrounded by a forest of huge spruce trees. Needless to say we never had a Christmas without a “real” Christmas tree. The smell of an evergreen tree being brought inside from the cold of winter has no equal. It has never been copied by a fake “evergreen” or “pine” spray. The smell of snow and cold seemed to linger on the tree boughs even after it was in the house.

The excitement leading up to Christmas was not dampened by the stringent Advent laws imposed by our mother. Christmas Eve was celebrated with nuts, candy, apples, mandarin oranges, fruitcake and the long awaited Christmas cookies. A very important part of Christmas Eve was decorating the Christmas tree and singing the familiar carols lead by Mom and Dad. Our tree was decorated with great care with real candles in their little tin holders which clamped onto the tree bough. The older children would be responsible for this important decorating task as well as stringing the tinsel garlands and hanging the precious glass balls. I always thought it was the most beautiful tree in the world.

When I was very small, I remember Dad taking the youngest children up into the attic and telling us that this was the night the “Krist Kindel” would come and bring us presents. We would hear sleigh bells outside and then the front door would crash open and a huge box full of wrapped presents would come flying into the front porch along with lots of snow and cold. It was always so exciting and always, there was the hope that the very special thing we wanted most would be in that box of gifts.

The farm next to ours belonged to another German family and we would take turns celebrating Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at each other's homes. I loved the Christmas Eve when Dad would hitch the horses to the open sleigh and we would all be bundled in warm coats, boots, hats, mitts and scarves – only our eyes were allowed to peep out. Dad would have put the bells on the horses' harnesses and away we would go in the snapping cold under a black velvet sky filled with thousands of stars that seemed so close you could reach out and touch them. The spruce trees would be dressed in their winter finery of snow-covered branches which sparkled in the starlight. If it happened to be a full moon – it was a magical scene – brilliant white snowdrifts sparkling against a backdrop of dark spruce trees and shadows creating a mysterious and beautiful landscape.

There has never been a Christmas since that time that I haven't reminisced and would have like to step back in time, just for a moment, to experience those days again.

Gerald Wagner, Electronic mail message to Michael M. Miller from St. Paul, Minnesota

Our Christmas was very simple with our parents, brothers and sisters as we did not travel or have visitors because at Christmas we were usually snowbound. We were nearly two miles of hilly section line trail to the nearest graded road so horses and bob sled were needed. We were seven miles south of Fredonia in 1937 as the crow flies. We had canned vegetables, sour kraut, canned meats both pork and chicken, smoked hams, bacon, homemade sausage my father made. We also had plenty of potatoes and home baked bread. Everything was home grown. We always had plenty to eat. We had no radio, telephone, newspaper. We played many board games and cards for entertainment.

**Electronic mail message from Gilbert E. Schauer, Longview, Washington
Glueckstal Church Christmas Memories, near Napoleon and Tappen, North Dakota**

I have been reading a lot of the notes of when we were children. I went to the Glueckstal Church as you know by now. What I remember most is it always seemed that the roads were blocked. So my older brothers and my Dad had to hook up a team of horses on what was the bobsled. It was five miles to church. We always had bells on the hames of the horses. I can still hear the crunching of the hoofs on the hard packed snow, the bells jingling. As we would be nearing the church, there would several other families, Langs, Mertzes, Reuers, just to name a few. These families traveled to church the same way. There was hay in the sled, we were covered up with what was called a lap robe that was made out of one of my Dad's horse hides. It was 30 and 40 below zero. I have told this story to my two girls Tauni and Terri. Their response was Dad that was living.

Electronic mail message from Homer Rudolf, Richmond, Virginia

During the holiday seasons I know that many of us think back to earlier celebrations with our family, and the family traditions that were observed. That also prompts many of us to wonder what the Christmas holidays were like for our ancestors in South Russia, and what traditions were observed there.

I do recall, with some trepidation, that when I was young the trees in our church and in our home both had real candles that were lit at special times. Although, I wouldn't think of using candles today, I often wish that I still

had one of those little candle holders that clipped onto the branches of the tree. The Bergdorf Lutheran Church was the first among the Glueckstal Colonies to have electronically controlled gas lights – installed in time for Christmas 1908. Somehow, I’m sure that they still used candles on their Christmas tree that year.

Some of you remember having the “Belzenickel” and the “Christkindl “visit your homes on Christmas Eve. In our community, when company came to visit during the Christmas holiday period, the hostess invariably said: “Well, let’s have some “Christkindl”.” What happened then was that cookies, hard candy, etc. were brought out, and everyone gathered around the table to munch away and make “Maistub!”

Here’s my list of the special things prepared at our house for the Christmas holidays: Various cookies (Ammonia, Pfeffernuesse, Date Pinwheel, Plantation Creme, and prune-filled cookies whose name I don’t remember), Popcorn Balls, Blachenda, Kuchen with various toppings, and, of course, we always managed to buy some “Halva” at one of the local stores. Before we had our own freezer, the unheated “Vorheisl” was a great North Dakota substitute.

There was always the Christmas Eve program, planned and directed by the Sunday School teachers, and every child was included in the program. After the program, children received paper bags containing nuts, candy and fruit. One year my seven brothers and sisters and myself did not receive bags of goodies. That was the first time we knew that our parents paid for the bags. That year their order got messed up, and we received the bags the next day!

Mom and Dad said that often the only gift they received at Christmas was an orange. Somehow, as we were growing up, Mom and Dad managed to get up in the middle of the night to put the gifts under the tree – and we never caught them! The first kid to wake up in the morning would creep downstairs to check out the tree, and then would wake everyone else up.

A Very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all on behalf of Margaret Freeman, Connie Dahlke and myself!

By Katherine and Mary Weisgerber, Las Vegas, Nevada, Natives of Weybum, Saskatchewan, December, 2009.

Kay and I would like to send a story about Christmas. Christmas was always very special to us even though there were hard times. We didn’t know anything about good times. Whatever happened was normal to us. When you were a big family like ours was, there were more people to share with.

Our parents still managed a lovely Christmas for us. There was always “a gift” for everyone, whereas now a day one would feel slighted with one gift.

We remember a lot of good baked goods: Boska, Marrvis, Kaeskuchen, and Suker Kuchen. Our mother was very artistic so she could create beautiful things such as a Christmas tree. She would shape an object from mud with wheat kernels mixed into it. The object was the shape of a cone upside down. This was done long enough before Christmas so that after spraying the mud with water periodically, the wheat would grow enough to make the object remind us of a tree.

Another tree my mother made was a Christmas tree made from sticks, an old broom handle and green crepe paper. My father drilled holes up and down the broom stick and anchored the stick some way to a

stand. Mother took small sticks from trees, about the size of a pencil to insert into these holes that were drilled into the broom stick. Before inserting these sticks mother cut green crepe paper into strips, then cutting three – quarters of the way sideways into these crepe paper strips, a quarter inch apart. Then the paper was wrapped around the small sticks to create the look of a small tree branch.

After the tree was completed and ornaments were hung on it, we were very happy to have a Christmas tree. Where we lived, in southern Saskatchewan, there were no wild trees to cut down for a Christmas tree. Trees were planted around the farm home for wind breakers and landscaping.

By Margaret Ensor, Davenport, Washington

I remember that we had a separate huge living room with a wide sliding door. We would go to the Church Children's Christmas Eve program at about 7 PM. When we got home from that. (we all of course had "pieces" to say and costumes to wear), Santa had brought our gifts which were all under the Christmas tree in the living room. My parents would open the sliding door and we were so excited that Santa had come while we were at church. We never had any gifts that we opened in the morning. Even when we were older and there was no longer any Santa, we exchanged gifts when we came home from the Christmas eve program. My mother usually invited guests (extended family members or close friends) for dinner on Christmas Day.

Electronic mail message from Rod Metzler, Fresno, California

Sincere thanks to Jake Bergman for that informative article on Christmas Traditions. Thanks too for the source for the Glass Decorations.

Our Christmas Traditions in Fresno centered around family and Church... The two times you could actually see demonstrated the miracles of Christianity came at Christmas, when those dead since Easter were "reborn" and came back to church, and at Easter, when the dead since Christmas were resurrected... but enough of that...

Christmas in my family started with the Christmas Tree. Boy Howdy! My mom was the champion Christmas Tree person. Right after Thanksgiving dinner was cleared and we were still eating Turkey left-overs, she began shopping the Christmas Tree lots. We had to try them all and then go back to the place where the 'nearest to perfect' tree had been spotted, and if we were in luck and it was still there, bring it home. Tree shopping took the better part of a Saturday afternoon or even a Saturday evening depending on my dad's work schedule.

Then the decorations planned since the previous Christmas had to be executed.

My earliest recollections were of trees without lights on them... My mom liked the idea of flood lights with colored gels Even during the war years, she illuminated the tree through the living room window... (no enemy would dare attack on Christmas Eve!) We always had very formal trees... balls all one color or sometimes two... very coordinated. Gram-ma Metzler and Auntie Dunn always had more informal trees with all kinds of lights a different shaped ornaments. One of my earliest recollections was a tree with real candles on it and all lighted for one evening... It was spectacular. Gram-ma used to like to tell how her ornaments came from Czechoslovakia...

There were any number of fiascoes I could relate about spraying, flocking and all, but suffice it to say, once my mom actually learned how to use the 'reverse' on her Electrolux we had sprayed trees. Our garage more than once looked like there had been an explosion of snow or ice inside it... Never mind in all the years I lived in Fresno, I cannot ever remember snow falling there... Long before Der Bingle heard of a 'White Christmas' my mom made it happen... or else...

The tree usually got decorated and put in place by the first Sunday in Advent. Even though in those days our church didn't know much about Advent as a holy season, my mom learned about it and would get us Advent Calendars from some of her friends at work and with those little windows in the picture, we marked the days.

No presents were ever displayed under the tree until after Church on Christmas Eve. My family would drive the seven miles to our church in Fresno and we would have a 'program'... that meant we had a lot of kids stammering through 'pieces', reciting poems and singing strange new songs off key. There was always the reading of the lessons of Christmas as well as lots of carols the choir singing but the sermon usually was more like a talk the kids could understand. The Church was always packed. Every kid got a net stocking from under the 25' plus tree that stood right next to the elevated pulpit. That tree had lights and all kinds of different decorations on it... even some made by the Sunday School.

Each kid got a stocking. There was always a great big Washington Delicious Apple, a Navel Orange and walnuts and other kinds of more exotic nuts. You could count on that. Sometimes there were hard cookies and hard candy, the kind my grandmother would stash away wrapped in a handkerchief to bribe us to sit still and not wriggle during the sermon and stuff later in the year. I don't remember toys being part of the stocking... just edibles...

After the 'program' we all went home to our house where it was 'safe' because we lived out in the country... given Fresno's fog it could be a far more dangerous journey than any air attack, besides they'd never see us for the fog.

Eventually we'd get home and what to our wondering eyes did appear? You guessed it, Santa had come and left the tree laden with all kinds of presents. (We never seemed to time it right to catch him in the act.) One year, my dad did show my brother and me the skid marks of Santa's sleigh on our driveway though, so we'd obviously just missed him!

Then it all began. We opened our Christmas presents! The youngest first, through the oldest. (Poor Uncle Augie, always had to wait until last... he often fell asleep before he could even open one present.) So it went, until everyone had opened all his/her gifts. By this time it was often past midnight because there were often as many as 21 of us before my cousins went off to the war...

After the presents, we ate, and ate, and ate and... well you get the picture. Everyone brought something and each one brought enough to feed the whole group on just what they alone brought.

Christmas was the one time when the kids could stay up really late. Sleep was out of the question with all that loot.

Christmas Trees, Church, food and Mrs. See's Chocolates are my most vivid memories... Pretty much the same as now, in fact, except we have a lot harder time to get the Mrs. See's here in Texas... only in certain malls, and

they you can't make your own box up, but that's a different story...

A blessed holiday season to you all, and keep in mind the 'reason for the season'.

By Jerry M. Richter, Jamestown, North Dakota

Reading Martha [Gaetz] Wojtowicz response caused me to remember our Christmas Traditions:

Christmas was a time of delicious smells emanating from the kitchen, as Mom began holiday preparations of pies, cakes, cookies and homemade candies.

The central tradition at our house was going to Christmas Eve's Midnight Mass. I still remember the front of the church with live Christmas trees and the Nativity scene. I can still smell the scent of pine trees. Even with no lights nor tree ornaments, everything was so beautiful; plus the music sung by the St. James Academy Choir. [I would in later years try out for the choir, only to have Sister Camillus take me aside and say to me, "Jerome, God is gracious to all his children and gives each one special gifts and talents. But I am sorry to say that the gift of singing is not one of the many gifts, which he has given you.] A very short-lived musical career for me!!!

In those days the Mass was still said in Latin. After Mass when we had returned home, we always had oyster stew, with those neat little oyster crackers. [This was not a favorite of my three sisters and I, but we would labor through this tradition.] Our parents absolutely loved this treat.

Christmas Day was the culmination of suspense: completing our morning chores and making sure all animals had extra feed and bedding. It was time to cleanup, to finish breakfast, and to see what Santa had brought us.

My sisters and I would wear out pages of the Sears wish-book, hoping Santa would bring us our hearts' desires. We usually got one item of our many desires: The proverbial shirt, blouse, hankies, etc. ... And always a book from Dad. He fully believed that we could lay the world at our feet, from the pages of a book. A sentiment we didn't quite share, yet he never knew our thoughts.

And always the fresh, fresh fruit: Oranges, apples, and bananas. I can still taste those fruit! It was such a treat!

Also, for us children was the big bag of mixed nuts. Even today, some fifty-plus years later, I still try to open a Brazil nut without demolishing the nut meat. I succeed more often now, than those early years.

Christmas Day saw all of our aunts, uncles, and cousins for the Christmas Dinner. Although times were very tough as I realize now, at that time the world just seemed right. Us kids never realized that we were poor. We had each other [to cherish]! And the love of family will blot out many flaws ... well, maybe not the set of Lincoln Logs. What the heck! There was always my birthday coming up in three months... or next Christmas.

Meanwhile, we siblings fought over ribbon candy and those chocolate stars, shaped like a Hershey kiss. But my siblings and I had our secret stashes, which held us for a week or more.

Beautiful memories! But I am not so sure that I would want to relive them again. These beautiful memories have a way of blotting out times that were not so great. But good memories stir my heart at this Season of Hope and Joy. Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year to Everyone.

Electronic email message from Connie Jo Mehlhoff, Salem, Oregon

My Father's Grandparents were born in Neudorf, Kassel and Alexanderhilf, Russia. My Grandmother Elizabeth was born in North Dakota, and my Grandfather Otto in Pierre, South Dakota. Christmas was always a special time for us kids with our Grandparents and family. On Christmas Eve, my Grandparents would first visit my Aunt Olene and Uncle Lyle and their three children. My Grandmother had spent the previous days baking our favorite, "Kuga", baking anywhere from 10-20 of these wonderful epicurean German delights!! After the gift exchange and devouring of the "Kuga" and the usual family conversations, my Grandparents hopped into their vintage aqua VW "Bug" and rambled across town to our house. The three of us kids would sit anxiously in front of our 7 foot window, trying to see who could first see the VW pull into the driveway and scream "they're here!!!" it was then a race to open the front door to greet my Grandparents! Coats and hats didn't come off first before all of the hugs and kisses were dispersed. The "Kuga" was then sliced and devoured and on-going compliments to the baker bestowed upon her! Nobody could bake the "Kuga" but my Grandmother, and it was always wonderful. She made: prune, cottage cheese, pear, and our favorite, apple. The process of exchanging of gifts began all over again, my Grandparents smiling and chuckling over gift wrap being thrown here and there. My Grandmother was a very good seamstress, and for Christmas she always made clothing and quilts for my dolls. After my Grandparents left for home, we then went to my Norwegian Aunts home for more food which consisted of a few Norwegian dishes, potato salad, ham and other goodies. Usually my Uncles Sister and her family were also there, it was a delightful house full. We usually went caroling and played games like Monopoly. My Uncles sister, Jeannie usually took us caroling. On Christmas Day, all of us, from in-laws to "out-laws" all converged at my Aunt and Uncles home for a wonderful dinner of ham, cabbage, potatoes, homemade bread, pickles and if we were lucky, left over "Kuga". The basement in my Aunts home was turned over to us kids. We roller-skated, rode tricycles, played games and had the best time of our lives, while upstairs the adults played pinochle. Every year it was a tradition to pick a child that had utilized his or her best manners to dine at the adult table. It was quite an honor to be able to sit between my aunts mother in law and my Grandmother and be asked to say the table blessing. I am older now, and my beloved Grandparents are no longer living. The baking of the traditional "Kuga" is now up to me. I appreciate more than ever what my Grandmother did for us by baking so many "Kuga". She did it out of love for us. I was extremely lucky to have grown up in a family that was close and extremely loving, all the way around. I hope to pass along family traditions to my nieces and nephews so that someday, they too will be able to pass to their own children the traditions and heritage that is rightfully theirs.

Merry Christmas and God Bless all of you!