

Memories of Christmas in Strasburg, North Dakota 1938-1958

By Sister Katherine Kraft, O.S.B., St. Benedict Monastery, St. Joseph, Minnesota, December 2012

I can't celebrate Christmas without fond memories of the remarkable way it was celebrated by the Germans from Russia—with beautiful traditions the people of Strasburg, North Dakota, brought with them from Ukraine. The celebrating began before Christmas with the Feast of Saint Nicholas. On December 5, the eve of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, we put out our shoes eager to discover in the morning whether they would be filled with candy, if we had been good, or a lump of coal, if we had been bad. One year my brother got both candy and coal!

There was also the much feared arrival, at any time, of the scary Bilzanickel in a heavy sheepskin coat, hood and chains around his waist which rattled as he walked. He was the Ukrainian version of the German Ruprecht (Rupert) who kept a record of our behavior and whose role seemed to be that of scaring children into being good in preparation for Christmas. The first time he appeared at our house, I was so terrified that I hid under the bed with a nose bleed.

On one of the Saturdays before Christmas, some group in town, perhaps the Knights of Columbus or the small business owners, arranged for the arrival of Santa Claus on Main Street. He arrived in a sled pulled by horses and presented every child with a bag of candy, peanuts and an orange. This was followed by a free movie in the local theater, often a cowboy feature preceded by a "Three Stooges" comedy and Looney tunes cartoon.

One of my favorite memories was picking out the biggest tree from the trees sold at Kraft Brother's store, my dad and uncle's store. The Kraft children were in charge of decorating the tree--never begun until December 24th. We straightened every icicle, watched the bubble lights warm up, set up the crib under the tree, placing the kings at various distances, moving them closer each day until they arrived on time for the Feast of Epiphany. We ate an early Christmas Eve supper with the excitement intensifying as we awaited the arrival of special visitors. The first to appear was Santa Claus, stomping his feet and singing, "Up on the House Top" and "Jingle Bells." There were no gifts from Santa Claus—our best gifts came from the Christkind delivered by angels whose coming was announced with the tinkling of silver bells. All lights, except the tree's, were extinguished as three ethereal angels with star studded wings and sparkling crowns floated into the room. After blessing, the tree they sang "Silent Night" in English and German, and presented each child with a special gift before disappearing quietly into the night.

All the other gifts were opened to "ohs" and "ahs" for the hoped-for doll, dart gun, or some unexpected gift. Our large extended family stayed around the tree until time for Midnight Mass. Walking in the dark to the crunching sound of winter boots on snow packed streets, we entered Saint Peter and Paul's Church, decorated with dozens of lighted Christmas trees surrounding a huge crèche. Carols were sung until time for mass to begin—sometimes, Father Matthew Fettig, OSB, accompanied the choir on the violin. We hurried home, our breath frozen on the cold December air, to enjoy Christmas ham baked in dough "to keep the juices in," and served with braided sweetbread, pickles or sour watermelon and halvah. Then, it was off to bed for a brief sleep before returning to sing in the choir at Christmas Day mass.

Thankfully, Christmas didn't end on December 26th. On the Feast of St. John, homemade wine and braided bread were brought to mass and blessed in memory of the Beloved Apostle who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. And on New Year's Eve it was customary for some of the town's adult men to appear at one's home after midnight, shooting a rifle into the air to announce the arrival of the New Year. They were rewarded with a shot glass of Schnapps or whiskey growing merrier as they traveled from house to house.

The Feast of Epiphany (January 6th) meant the arrival of three kings in royal robes and crowns carrying blessed chalk with which they marked the doors of every house: "K + B + M 1948." The initials stood for the traditional names of the magi: K for Kaspar, B for Balthazar, and M for Melchior, followed with whatever year it happened to be. These were wonderful traditions for which I am grateful and hope someone is continuing.