

Christmas 1945, Java, South Dakota

Marvin C. Hoffer, Lewiston, Montana, December 27, 1993

Christmas, 1945, Java, S.D. Been a while since I thought of those times. Let's see now, I was about 9, going on 10 or so. By brothers Al and Gary were born, and my sister Frieda, older than me.

Christmas was always an anticipated time at our house. My Dad always bought 4-8, sometimes more, boxes of Red Delicious apples from Washington state. They came by rail box car, at least 1, sometimes two boxcars full of apples. Sold out fast. Occasionally an uncle of ours, George Hoffer, who lived in Marysville, Calif. sent us oranges and nuts. Special treat! S.D. isn't noted for its Christmas trees, so my folks bought a tree shipped in from lord knows where. Usually was a little thing, bout 4-5 ft. high, which sat on top of the library table in the living room, never on the floor. Had a bunch of lights, old, very old, glass ornaments, tinsel that we salvaged from the tree year after year. Was sort of a scraggly little thing, almost a runty looking tree to start with, but after our decorating efforts, looked right smart. We made colored paper chains of people, and tediously strung popcorn with a needle and some of Mom's sewing thread. Added some color to the tree.

St. Paul Lutheran Church always had a Christmas Program at which every little beggar up to about 15, or so, said their "piece", their "Sprichly." A Christmas recitation, learned slowly word for word. Many, most, of the children were "farm kids", of German-Russian heritage. Most of them learned German at home, as I did, even before learning English in the public schools. So little Oscar and Janice (real people) trotted, very hesitantly, out on the "stage", the steps on front of the alter, at church and said their little piece with a thick Germanic accent that fit right in with the rest of us. A covey of teachers hovered around the "wings" encouraging them to start, and to help them through the piece. Some years there were over 100 children to recite their "Sprichly". There were always those that whipped it out with great ability, no mistakes, and their folks sitting smug or grinning from ear to ear with satisfaction with their child. Most of us had a heck of a time getting started, couldn't even remember our name, let alone this piece we worked so hard for the last two days. Teachers had to prompt us on each word. Took a while to get through the evening. Lots of fidgeting, and poking.

This was interrupted by a bit of singing by various groups, including the German Choir, of which I was a part of from mid-high school to college years after the military. There is no finer piece of Christmas music in the world than Silent Night sung in German in a small church packed to the rafters on Christmas Eve. Even today I become emotional and shed a silent tear when singing it in German.

Then, when all but the smallest child, who simply stood up front unable to say any word of what Mom had worked on for the past month, had finished, the church councilmen brought out the brown paper sacks for each child. This was the reward, the highlight, for each of us. The sacks held different kinds of nuts, hard candy of many colors, an orange from far away California, and peanuts in the shell. It was forbidden to open the sacks until we got home, but most kids were sucking on a piece of hard Christmas candy by time they left the church.

There was always a commotion when parents began bundling-up the Kinder in their winter clothing. I suspect that sometimes mothers with 3-5 little beggars in tow, carried a wee bundle out to the car, but learned half way home that the child was left in the church basement among piles of cloths and blankets. All she had was the

baby cloths, no kid. Uff Da!! Eventually, all the red, runny noses were counted, and Dad got the old Model B Ford rolling homeward through the crisp snow under a full moon. Most of the towns people walked to church no matter the temperature or how much it snowed. Sleds were fashioned with an apple box on top to hold the littlest of the family. Many of the parents heated a brick or a medium-sized stone in the wood stove oven, wrapped that in a blanket and tucked it in the apple box to keep the Kinder's feet warm.

When we got home we ate the good things from the church sacks, plus those that Mom set on the kitchen table. You would think that we didn't get these goodies during the year. You are right on that. We opened the gifts, not many, but something for everyone. Usually we got winter cloths, warm things, socks, gloves, hats, maybe a sweater or coat. But on occasion we got Tinker Toys, Erector Set, colors, coloring books, a nice scarf for Mom, and work gloves for Dad. The old coal-wood heater in the living room was usually stoked to the gills and generated a lot of good heat till we went to bed. Then the feather ticks had to do their stuff. My best little dog buddy, "Spot" quickly did what he did every winter night, crawled under the quilts to the bottom of the bed where he slept and warmed my feet. How he survived down there is beyond me.

Those were lean years, the War Years, but we as a family of 7, managed to celebrate Christmas in a little Germanic community smack dab in the middle of the Dakota Great Plains, and remember the good things about it. It is an interesting feature of humanity, that we tend to forget, or eliminate from our memory, those negative, the hard, things of our life; and remember the better, the happier parts of our lives.