



CHRISTMAS PAST IN JASPER PLACE

MAXINE HEBERT

Well, Christmas is just around the corner, it seems. When I go out in the evening I see more and more lights on the houses. I like this time of year. I have always liked Christmas and I thought in this issue I would tell you about an old-fashioned Christmas in Jasper Place.

When Mom and Dad and I first moved into our house in the Summer of 1947 we didn't have electricity until the following Spring, so the first Christmas was without lights on the Christmas tree. Mom and I made decorations as brightly colored as possible to make up for it, and we had lots of fun.

Christmas started early in those days, actually in October, when Mom made her Christmas cakes. We started by saving the best brown paper bags to line the pans with. Choosing the fruit and nuts was a big deal. Mom would buy whole walnuts, not the already shelled ones. It was always my job to crack the walnuts open and it had to be done perfectly. I had to crack them so that the two halves would split without being smashed. (I will tell you why later). Then we would get out the big dishpan and everything would go in and had to be mixed up perfectly, and into the waiting pans lined with greased brown

paper bag, and then into the oven for hours and hours it seemed. It smelled divine.

My Grandma always made the Christmas puddings for everyone. Each family got one and they were so good. She made them from currants from her own bushes that she brought over from England in 1912. My Grandpa had already come over to Canada earlier to build the house in Beverly before Grandma and the boys came. Can you imagine a woman alone coming with four little boys on a boat, then a train from Halifax and bring currant bushes too. I guess she wanted to have a little bit of England out in Beverly. We were glad she did because they made the most delicious puddings. Every year there was the decision to make – hard sauce, rum sauce, brandy sauce, but my favorite was lemon sauce, and still is. To this day when I have Christmas pudding, I make a lemon sauce.

Now, onto the homemade decorations. We would take the walnut shells and Mom would put glue all around the edges and stick a loop of string in the glue, and then the other half would go on and they had to dry. Then we would paint the walnut shells with whatever paint we had – silver, gold, red and green. They were very pretty. For garland, we would string popcorn with a darning needle and also raw cranberries. After Christmas they

were all unstrung and the popcorn was put out for the birds, but the cranberries went into a pot with some sugar and made into cranberry sauce for the next time we had chicken or turkey. Nothing was wasted in those days.

The Christmas tree selection was important. It had to be perfect. My Dad didn't have a car until the 1960's, so a friend of Mom and Dad would come by in his old car and we would go out to some lake and cut down a tree. It was fun. I have to laugh when I think of Christmas trees because times were tough in those days – it was just after the war with not too much extra money around. My husband, when he was about 11 years old, thought he would do something nice for his Mom, so he went into a neighbor's yard with his little hatchet and cut down one of their evergreen trees and was so proud to bring it home to his Mom. However, he had never heard the term "covering your tracks", and the police followed where he dragged the tree through the snow right to their back door. What a bad little boy, but it makes me chuckle still.

Decorating the tree was always fun for me, trying to find just the right spot for everything. I never expected a lot of presents under the tree though, and they were usually very practical gifts – a new sweater, pajamas, robe, etc. – things you needed. One year though I got a real surprise. Miraculously under the tree was a new bike. I was not expecting it. I could not believe it, and it seemed an awfully long time until Spring when I could go outside and ride it. I was so proud of my new bike. There was always a gift for me under the tree from my Aunt Irma, who was Swedish. She was so handy with her hands and she always made something – knitted hat and mittens with scarf to match, or slippers. I loved those gifts, and always felt so special that she had made them for me.

The days before Christmas were busy for Mom and I. We made cookies and candy and lots of goodies. We always made star-shaped shortbread cookies with a tiny candy silver ball in the middle. I think that star was the only cookie cutter Mom had.

Finally, it would be Christmas day and the excitement that came with it, opening the gifts and getting ready for company. We always had another couple over for Christmas, usually Alice and Walter as they didn't have children, so they liked to spend Christmas at our house. Mom would be busy in the morning getting the turkey ready and the stuffing prepared, peeling the vegetables and getting things "just right". It was always my job to get the salad plate ready for the table. Mom would make me mash up the Velveeta cheese with a fork to put into the celery. In those days there was no Cheese Whiz, but the Velveeta came in two-pound blocks in little wooden boxes. Anyone remember those? They were wonderful for keeping buttons, crayons, etc. We had a coal and wood stove then, and everything smelled so good cooking on that old stove. My Mom would make lefse for my Uncle Gunnar, who was Norwegian, on top of the stove. It was always my job to keep the top of the stove clean, shining it with newspaper.

Everyone would sit around the table in our tiny little kitchen. Of course, by that time it was dark out so the kerosene lamps had to be lit (for our first Christmas) which made everything seem so magical. Everything tasted so good, even to the last spoonful of my Grandma's Christmas pudding (with imported currants). I love those old Christmas memories, and I am so glad that I have them tucked away to think about each Christmas.

Merry Christmas everyone – my family, friends and neighbors, and those that I don't know but who took the time to read this.



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