

## 1999 Christmas Memories

The following letter was sent to my 5 kids just before Christmas 1999 and tells of my Christmas memories during my childhood. In 1999 I was still living in Freeport, IL.

Dear Larry, Lori, Cindy, Sandi, and Randy,

It is before 9AM, the day before the last Thanksgiving Day of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and I am sitting at the far end of the United terminal at O'Hare, Chicago. Already this morning, the airport is teeming with travelers, all heading somewhere special. There are as many life stories here as there are people, but the beautiful Christmas decorations are firing up memories of Christmases Past in this mom's heart.

So many pictures from my childhood click through my mind. Christmas was such a loving time when I was a little kid. My parents couldn't afford much, but Santa always came through with a new doll. As soon as the tree was put up, all my dolls, in freshly laundered dresses, were arranged at the base of the tree. Santa placed the new one among the older ones and sometimes even repaired hair or eyes on the existing ones while he visited. One year Carol's bedraggled locks were replaced with the equivalent of a modern day close cropped Afro. She never looked quite the same but I loved her anyway. Some of the dolls who joined Carol thru the years were Lois, Elsie, Leanne, Mary (Monica has her now), Nancy and a few more.



One year there was lots of snow on the ground during the week before Christmas but the forecast was for a drastic warm-up. My parents were busy in the barn with chores one night and Grandma Pieper had me occupied helping her wind yarn into balls in the living room. I heard the old porch door slam and tried to go see who was there. Grandma kept dropping the yarn and, after she finally didn't need help, I discovered Santa had been on the porch and left a beautiful "Flyer" sled.....and I had missed him! Sure enough, by Christmas the snow had

all melted and the yard was pure mud. How fortunate that old Santa was in the neighborhood early that year. He came Christmas Eve too but my parents explained to me that he sometimes delivered bulky gifts early so his sleigh wasn't so heavy for the reindeer to pull. (That same "Flyer" sled scared the living patooey out of the mailman one day. Mom used to pile a bale of straw on it, then she and I would hop on at the barn and get some super great speeds going down the driveway past the house, before negotiating a sharp right turn at the mailbox and end up halfway to Buttels' lane. One morning we had a colossal run going and were almost ready to hang to the right when Mom spotted the mailman's car coming from the west. She screamed, "Jump! Jump!" just before we reached the road and Mr. Evarts pulled up to the mailbox. We rolled off but the sled cruised under the car after the bale of straw smacked into the side. Poor Mr. Evarts wasn't in very good shape after that little episode and Mom and I never repeated our wild ride.) Later I can remember riding that sled down the hill, standing up, and hanging on to the rope for dear life. Several fat lips convinced me of the folly of that practice.

One Christmas morning I was convinced that I saw sleigh and hoof prints on the snow covered kitchen roof. **OF COURSE**, my dad agreed completely and he and Uncle George spent a good amount of time that day discussing how Santa got up enough speed on that little roof for take-off. To this day, I can't explain what I saw.

Santa used to alternate directions around the world Christmas Eve. Some years he came overnight while we were asleep. Other years he came while we were at church services. *The following entry is from Mom's 1949 diary.*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24

some sun shine  
not so cold  
we went to the Valley Book store  
264 not food they were 24.  
we took Mrs. Rabkin's gift to  
them  
went to Christmas Eve program  
in church Linda had a part  
in it  
Santa was here while we were gone  
Linda got a doll, Charles color books color  
etc

Come to think of it, those were the years Mom accidentally left the teakettle on the old wood burning cook stove and had to run back into the house while Dad and I waited in the car on our way to church. I never could understand why it took her so long to pull a dumb teakettle off the stove. Sure enough, when we got home from church, Santa had been there! He must have had a skeleton key because the door was always locked overnight or when we were gone.

My first gifts from my Nebraska aunts were the figurines for a nativity scene. *The picture below is of my folks in 1955 in their home at German Valley, IL. See the nativity scene behind them.*



It was always placed on Mom's long black buffet (Sandi has that buffet now and it has been refinished to a beautiful natural wood color.). Mom and Grandma Pieper built a great barn out of scrap lumber and molded a slew of Plaster of Paris sheep. Pinecones were painted green, dusted with glitter, and set into plaster bases to resemble trees -- pines in Bethlehem?



A week or so before Christmas my folks always bought a fresh tree and I was always disappointed at first that it would be too small. Oh, the joy when it was all set up and it looked

just fine! (One year Mom came home with a tree for \$2 that only had branches on one side but it was utterly lush in the front. That one was probably the prettiest one of them all.) After evening milking chores were done, we hung all the decorations and lights on the tree.



Then we turned off the room lights and drank tea and ate cookies while singing Christmas carols till bedtime. *See the entry from Mom's 1953 diary.*

————— **FRIDAY - DECEMBER 18** —————

uncle Dick mama Folker and I  
went to Freeport  
we got our tree etc  
Water in the tree to night sang  
songs had lunch at 10:30  
got gifts under the tree wonder  
what's in them

Each year, it was the most beautiful tree ever!



Now disassembling that tree was an entirely different matter. A very spoiled brat put up a terrible conniption and never wanted the tree taken down. I remember agreeing that I couldn't set out Easter baskets until the tree was gone. (Remember, that was a fresh tree so there weren't very many needles left by that time.) Eventually, Mom pulled rank and wouldn't let me hang up my valentines if the tree was still standing. The final step was -- and you should hear drum rolls here -- no birthday party (January 10) if I didn't cooperate. (No, contrary to persistent rumors, I did NOT have to postpone my Sweet Sixteen party.)

Stored upstairs was a fireplace, fashioned from several crates and paper that looked like red bricks.



A good many years the mantel was decorated with a tiny 4-inch tall village. Each building was constructed of brown cardboard. (If you pulled off the outer layer of paper, the remainder of

paper looked like logs.) Whipped Ivory soap flakes and water yielded believable snow on the roofs and around the houses. Mom sprinkled something that must have been a type of silica chip over everything and the whole scene sparkled beside the lighted Christmas tree.



Her most ambitious decoration was a house of cardboard, covered with white paper, and standing about 18 inches tall. There was a light inside and each window had curtains. A plastic Santa, sleigh, and deer were glued to the Ivory soap slathered rooftop. More of the famous green painted pinecones set in plaster blob bases were arranged in the picket fence enclosed yard and created a winter wonderland for a wide eyed child.



Christmas dinner was always a busy affair with the Corneliuses and Gerloffs. One of my earliest memories is of the long dining room table (before the room was partitioned off for a bedroom for me) stretched out with all its leaves and set with Mom's "good" dishes. All the beautiful bowls and platters were heaped with food. I especially remember the home made sweet pickles in a fancy glass dish with a teeny tiny gold pickle fork. (Ellen has several of those bowls now and it feels so good to see them on her table. My mom would be so proud!) The Piece de Resistance of the meal was generally duck, freshly harvested from Mom's chicken house or ham, cured at the local butchering establishment. One year Sue's aunt Betty got a

puppy from Maynard and the little critter had center stage all day, eventually falling asleep on Betty's lap.

My parents and I each always hung one of our stockings from the mantle of the fake fireplace. Santa left oranges and nuts in them. Once, my dad hung up a large burlap bag instead of his own sock. And, don't you just know, Santa filled that sack with coal. "Serves Daddy right for being so greedy!" That coal was burned the next day in the old cook stove, probably to roast the Christmas duck. Santa brought a bushel of apples and a huge sack of mixed nuts in shells each year. These were enjoyed, a few at a time, every night after evening chores for the next several months along with big bowls of buttered popcorn. There was no heat upstairs so Mom stored all the homemade candy in boxes on the stairway. I can assure you, that fudge was never too soft.

Warm days of early fall often found me sprawled out on the cool cement sidewalk south of the kitchen with the newest Sears "Wish Book" spread out before me. Santa got a very precise letter listing page numbers and even item numbers of the gifts I wished for. He usually came across with one comparable item on my personal list but the piker never brought the pretty dresses and jewelry for Mom or the fancy bathrobes for Dad.

Santa came to downtown German Valley one Saturday night each season. If there was snow, he often arrived in a sleigh pulled by a horse. We were told that the reindeer were resting up for Christmas Eve. Mrs. Santa was beside him, all decked out in a bright red coat and hat. (Years later I found out she was my pal Reuben's mom.) I clearly remember the long queue of little kids that stretched for almost a block from the tree in front of the bank. We each got a color book and a nice sack of candy, fruit, and nuts. *Below is Mom's 1950 diary entry.*

Saturday

DECEMBER 16

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Very cold today  
went to see santa come  
to town in pony & cutter  
Very nice santa had lots  
of balloons and each  
child got color book &  
candy apple nuts  
& below when santa come

Santa also brought a sack of candy for each of us at the annual school program. The church service on Christmas Eve was the source of yet another sack of goodies but Santa was too busy that night to attend.

Grades one through four were spent in a small one-room school east of German Valley. As soon as Thanksgiving was over, beloved Vernie Wilson, the teacher, guided her flock into Christmas preparations. *That's Mrs. Wilson below in about 1951 and again in 1957:*



Oh, such excitement! We always made gifts for our parents, but the last year of Iler School's existence, before consolidation forever changed our little community, there were only six students. Teacher Wilson piled us all into her car and we hit the big time, painting plaster figurines in a craft shop in Forreston, maybe 15 miles away. I remember painting a shiny black dog for my dad and a pair of poinsettia candleholders for my mom. That dog sat on Mom's 'What-Not' shelf from then on and the candleholders were carefully packed away each year. *Below is the black dog in 2013. Yup, he still exists! But those candleholders disintegrated years ago.*





To a greenhorn kid from German Valley, it seemed like we traveled for hours. I remember seeing a place along Highway 72 east of Forreton with a row of tall pines along the fence row. It seemed like another world. A few of those trees still are standing and I am, once again, a little kid going on a secret mission to make wonderful presents for my parents each time I drive by that spot.

There was an Iler School Christmas program every year and we kids pulled out all the stops to entertain our parents. Each small school planned their program on a different night so you could attend all of them. Fannie Juergens (Harlan and Valerie's grandma) was a very spunky German lady who was known for harassing the local teachers with the loud comment, "Dot vas goot, but now let's hear it in German!" One year we were ready for Fannie. Weeks of secret practice and Mrs. Wilson's swiftly graying hair were a pay off when we launched into "Silent Night" in German in response to Fannie's suggestion. We got a standing ovation for that one! *That's beloved Fannie in the picture below".*



Throughout my childhood, there was always a new home sewn Christmas dress. One was a bright rose watermarked taffeta confection. Another was made of beautiful shiny pink fabric that had a raised floral design on it and a silver belt.



That one had rhinestones sewn on the collar. Another year there was a silky lavender blouse with a purple wool skirt. I remember vividly the Christmas Eve my mom allowed me to wear her diamond engagement ring. I was SO proud until it dawned on me that somebody might think I was engaged to a BOY!! so I kept my other hand over it all during the church service so no one could see it. Today I would be so very honored to wear my mother's diamond. See Mom's ring below....Lori has it now:



The congregation up the road from us did not approve of Christmas trees so they hung lights and bells across the banisters in front of the sanctuary. The preacher's family kept their tree in a closet when parishioners visited. One day their little boy pulled open the closet door to hang up Mom's coat and a ball rolled out. There stood the tree! It stood alongside the TV, which was also a "No-No". I also remember standing in the pews of that church with other

kids, singing whatever we wanted, no matter which music was coming from the organ. (We kids often sang Christmas songs in the summer while our folks sang something entirely different.)

After Santa's reality faded into the recycle bin with the Easter Bunny, Christmas gift contents became a tricky thing to guess before actually unwrapping them. A really heavy package might yield a pretty scarf and a brick. Nail polish could be tucked in with a small metal pipe tobacco container of shelled corn, which rattled quite nicely. Up in the attic above the dining room was a huge box of recycled carefully folded wrapping paper. You simply searched the available inventory for the size sheet of paper you needed for a package. And that paper better not get ripped or crumpled when those gifts were unwrapped!

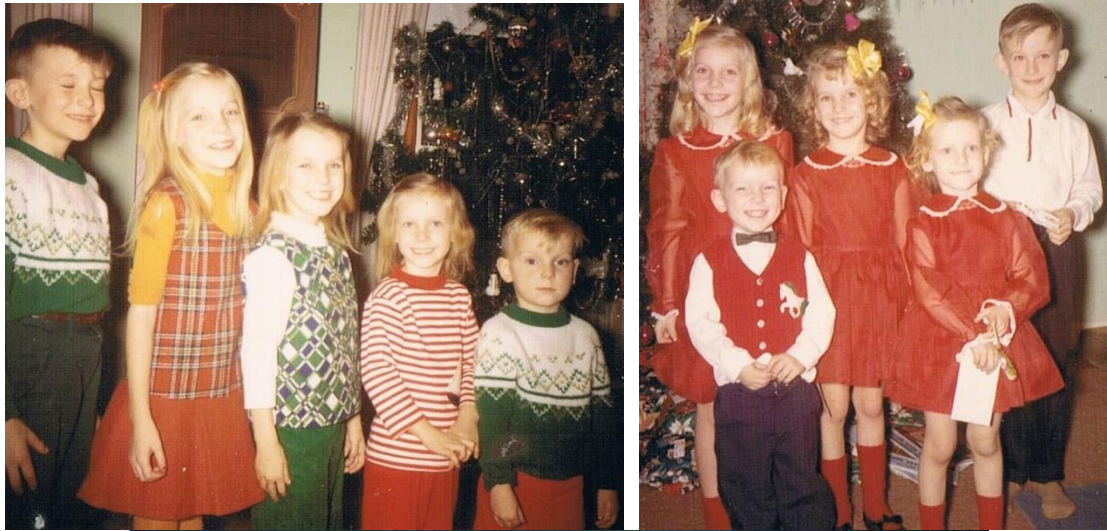
When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, my teacher, Mr. Fry, (pictured below) gave each student a small ornament with his or her name written on it.



Mine was LAVENDER!....and it has hung near the top of a tree for the past 43 years. It will once again hold a place of honor on my 1999 tree.

During the late 50's, the world was in a race to space and the Russians launched Sputnik. That Christmas many homes, including ours, were filled with Sputniks fashioned of white Styrofoam balls covered with toothpicks, each tipped with a tiny colorful glass ball. These were high tech decorations! Not so high tech were the gold painted walnuts suspended from a red ribbon which hung every year in the living room doorway.

The years went by until, one night just before Christmas during my high school junior year, I met a young man at a basketball game and we cruised Freeport later that evening looking at Christmas lights. Those lights eventually led to the five brightest lights in my life.



I love you!

This story goes on for almost 40 years more and will continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tune in next year, same time, same computer for the continuing saga of a mom's memories.

LOVE YA!