

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Alney Allbritten Norell

Summer was a happy time, although there was work to be done by every family member. Children were taught early that they, too, must do a share. Fall soon came, and with it, school again. Returning to our individual homes at the end of a long day, sometimes we took the short cut through the woods. If frosty weather had nipped the trees, their leaves would now make a fine show of bright gold, rust, and royal red—variations according to seasons. Frost first, then chill rains, sleet, and finally, snow. Snow came late, and meant you could start counting days till Christmas!

Can you remember long-ago winters and the snow which blew and fell, in a hurry to give fence-posts tall white caps? Reaching home—stomp, stomp on the porch! Unbuckle and take off galoshes, putting them in a box with a lid, nice and neat. Cheeks aglow, we made a breathless entry through the old kitchen door. Welcomed by the delightful aroma of fresh-baked bread, several kinds of pies and cakes, plus ginger snaps, and molasses cookies. But even before you hung your things on a peg back of the door, you could identify the assorted good things. Home held us in a warm embrace. Friday was generally baking and preparation day, getting ready for Sunday.

When coming in from school, I can recall my mother's face, her smile, as she firmly held a brown crusty loaf, and cut off two slices for me. She spread the bread with yellow-gold butter from our Jersey cows. With a tall glass of buttermilk, this was filling and wonderful food. But at supper time, especially if it had been a cold, dreary day, we children were hungry again. It might be a zesty beef hash, rich with brown gravy, plenty of onions, and biscuits baked on top. Or, perhaps there was a hearty chicken stew with dumplings, hot and bubbly! Or, pork sausage (home grown, home-made), with fluffy mashed potatoes and cornbread. Favorite desserts: apple pan-dowdy, or brown Betty, blackberry or peach cobbler—oozing juice! All served with luscious lemon or vanilla sauce, right from the pitcher, as it passed along. Each person could gauge for himself his own capacity. These desserts were rich with fresh eggs, sugar, cream, and a million calories! But, calories had not yet been invented! So one could eat, enjoy the flavor, and maybe tackle a second helping!

Pork and beef were grown on the farm, also flocks of fat chickens. We had eggs and milk in abundance. I recall in our "meal-room" or pantry, my grandfather Hicks always bought by the barrel our sugar, cornmeal and flour. About the only grocery items purchased were coffee, tea, condiments, and salt. We had a second pantry that held all the summer canning of fruits and vegetables. Grandfather was also a keeper of bees; two hives that fed on honeysuckle and August flower. So the honey was pale amber and tasted like

nectar. A big square of honeycomb reposed on the table in a glass "stand" with fitted lid—for the hot biscuits at every meal. The jams, jellies, preserves were Super! Though that word had not then been invented, either!

The glow of Christmas never dies. It is there forever in our hearts, to be remembered with warmth and affection. Happy memories do not fade with the years, but become more strong with Time. I can never forget as Christmas neared, how the excitement increased. The busy preparations, the feeling that something special was about to happen—and to us—swept us along on an exuberant wave of expectations! Christmas was the best time in the whole year. Letters to Santa had been written, changing and rearranging our lists of "wants" and hopes. We did not fail to mention how good our behavior had been.

In that old-fashioned kitchen, what spicy scents perfumed the air. All the wonders of home-baked bread, fruitcakes, mincemeat, mince pies, pumpkin tarts, grated nutmeg, cinnamon and orange peel. Corn was popped (cat-claw variety) with large fluffy kernels to be strung on turkey-red thread, then looped among branches of our Christmas tree.

The family was a close-knit unit of love and support. Our neighbors, friends, kin—all had kindness, and good-hearted joy prevailed. The true meaning of Christmas was understood. It had not then become commercialized.

About three days prior to The Day, we would go with grandfather, James Bryant Hicks, to the back section of the "woods," to find the perfect tree, which had to fit in the jog by the window, near the fireplace. Once the tree was selected and cut down, we collected an assortment of colorful vines, some with red berries, to make wreaths. Sometime before, Grandfather had spotted mistletoe growing way up high in an old oak tree. He had already shot it down before, because he never liked guns to be looked at or carried when children were present. He was a careful and thoughtful man.

Now, with the tree in place, braced, decorations would be brought from the "lumber room" (attic) upstairs—those very fragile ornaments. All new again, these balls of pink, silver, pale blue, red. Some of these ornaments had come from Germany, and each year my mother and Aunt Lottie would add a few new ones. These were treasures which included a delicate angel for the very top, and a gleaming star. There were shiny birds, with spun-glass tails to be clipped to small boughs. Icicles of silver-fine glass shimmered against the green. Our strings of popcorn accenting everything. Last would come the lights: tiny candles to cast a magic glow. Our small home-made presents, tucked amid the "boughten." Our gingerbread Santas iced, hung there ready for children's fingers.

On Christmas eve, to bed early. However, we hardly slept at all (or so it seemed). We were so sure we actually heard the pawing and stomping of reindeer on the roof as Santa slid down our chimney. Would the Big Doll be there (so longed for!)? Or, any little chairs for last year's doll house? So many questions, so many thoughts of surprises just ahead.

Our clean stockings were hung from the mantelpiece, knobby with unseen gifts. Small things, with Best for last, right down in the toe. What delight! What fun and laughter! How good the oranges smelled, how red the apples. So much happiness, so many dreams come true; our minds filled with memories—enough to last a lifetime!

I can see yet, the flickering firelight, tree a-sparkle. Everything folded in boundless bonds of love. How well remembered—how deeply and truly cherished!