

# Christmas

by Lenore Salvaneschi

In the china closet at home Mother kept a little cup of clear pressed glass with a pale ruby border on top. This cup was a symbol to her of Christmas past and of hope always present. It had been given to her when she was a very young child, in a year when her parents had said there would be no Christmas. It was a year of crop failure and panic (very possibly 1893) and Mother and her brothers and sisters knew that Santa Claus would not come. Yet Christmas morning, the elder brother, faith undimmed, crawled out of bed, glanced in the kitchen, and came running up the stairs. "He *did* come, he did come!" The parents had managed to set up a "tree," a dead branch from the grove, and each of the six children had a gift. For Mother it was the little glass cup, which must have cost all of 5 cents. It remained a treasure to her — an object of hope against hope. As such a symbol, I shall hand it down to my daughter.

I too have a Christmas recollection similar to this. During the Great Depression, perhaps the Christmas of 1929 when I was eleven, the farmers were in despair; it cost them more to bring their corn to the market than they received for their product. They had food and shelter, but no money (or so they said; I never knew an Iowa farmer to *be* without money, even though he frequently *did* without) and consequently Father had no salary. Then we too had been told there would be "no Christmas." Since we had had a large garden

and orchard and since Mother had spent most of the summer canning and preserving vegetables and fruit, we had something to eat, but we did long for a Christmas tree and something under it. The days before Christmas passed one by one and we had given up hope. At the very last moment — I shall never forget the sound of those heavy rubber boots crunching the snow on the front porch — a couple of the *Vorsteher* arrived and handed Father a "little something" they had collected for Christmas. It was not much (and Father never did receive the salary he earned during that time) but it provided Christmas for us. I have no memory of what gifts we received, though I am sure our parents tried to provide some; what was important was that at the last moment some people had cared enough to think of their pastor and his family.

Christmas during our childhood in the parsonage at Atkins was always a time of very special enchantment, even though it was inevitably accompanied by flu and severe colds in every household, certainly in ours, as my father's diaries attest.

In the parochial school the weeks before Christmas were spent in an orgy (if not panic) of learning our "pieces" and singing three- and four-part songs. The Christmas Eve program was always a showpiece for "Teacher," and in all fairness it must be said that the schoolchildren felt swept up in the production and

*Opposite: The author with the family Christmas tree after the holiday celebration, 1921. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)*



tried not to let him down. Usually we practiced in the schoolhouse, but at least once before Christmas we dashed through the cold to the adjacent church building and practiced with our coats on, the breath steaming into the musty frozen air. There was competition to see who would get the longest "piece," one of the prophecies from the Old Testament or portions of the Christmas story itself from St. Luke. Although there was favoritism, the parts usually went to the persons with the loudest voices and the best memories, for neither teacher nor parents could be disgraced by failure on Christmas Eve. The songs, hymns and carols, were almost all taken from the "Tyselect" (Theiss Select Book of Songs) published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, which formed the staple repertoire of songs throughout the year for all good Missouri Synod Lutheran children.

At home Mother would have been preparing *pfeffernüsse* and *hutzelbrodt* (the teacher's wife and preacher's wife always exchanged samples on Christmas morning).

My sister was the official fudge, penuchi, and divinity maker. Sugar must have been fairly inexpensive in those days, for I recall that she was never scolded for making all that candy. Father was preparing his holiday sermons for Christmas Eve (English), Christmas Day (German and English), Second Christmas Day (German and English), New Year's Eve (English and German in the early days), and New Year's Day (German and English). For weeks we children had been going through the Sears, Roebuck catalog to select the gifts we might like and had gone in to Atkins with Father every chance we had to see the table full of gifts at John Koehn's hardware store. Two weeks before Christmas, Johnny's son, Merlon, had brought catalogs of these gifts to school and handed them out before the teacher arrived. I can still see "Teacher's" dismay as he tried — vainly, of course — to keep us from looking at them and comparing "wishes" during the religion and arithmetic classes.

A day or two before Christmas, the trustees and elders would have brought the Christmas tree, a beautiful tall evergreen cut from some farmer's grove, to the church and set it up for the Walther Leaguers to decorate. These were the "young people" of the church and to decorate the Christmas tree was one of the big larks of the year. As long as I can remember the tree wore electric lights, but the wiring must have been uncertain for the elders always sat ready for an emergency with a big washtub filled with water on Christmas Eve. With the tree in place, adorned with tinsel, the church took on a different aspect. The cold wooden floors, the chipped golden oak pews, the musty carpet (only near the altar), and the dusty tin wainscoting seemed a little more respectful of the majesty of God. Even the mystery of the magi seemed to hover in the air, for the scent of the evergreen mingled with the oranges which were in the brown paper bags set behind the Christmas tree. On Christmas Eve every child in church received a brown grocery bag with an assortment of nuts on the bottom, an apple and an orange as well as a little sack inside with chocolate drops, the kind that took a deliciously, sensuously long time — almost a whole chapter of a Christmas book — to melt in one's mouth.

There was one custom which was observed only by our family, since we were the only ones of *Plattdeutsch* descent in the community. This was the custom, several weeks before Christmas (my guess is that it might have been the day of St. Nicholas, and thus probably a remembrance of my grandmother's childhood near Holland) of placing an object in the window, a knife for a boy, a doll for a girl, and then saying the jingle:

*Santa Klaus du gota Boot,  
Smit mir ein stük zuckerbrodt;  
Nit tu fehl and nit tu min  
Smit mi nur in fenster in.*

Inevitably, that evening (it had to be under



The author making a Christmas tree stand on the back steps, about 1920. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

cover of darkness) there would be a knock on the door and when we children hastened to open it we would find a little gift, a harbinger of Christmas. For years the magic kept alive, until one day my sister crossly complained about a headache from banging on the door; her shortness of breath and disheveled hair confirmed what I was beginning to suspect: there was no St. Nicholas. Or, if there was, he came in the shape of my sister!

The day of Christmas Eve was almost the most exciting day of the year. Now the real meaning of Christmas, the birth of the Christ Child, began to penetrate even our rapacious little hearts. For weeks the Christmas carols and the Advent services had been telling us all this, but the songs had been mostly a form of entertainment, and sermons

were for adults. But now the parlor door was shut and even though I never believed, as we were told, that the *Kristkind* actually brought the Christmas gifts — He seemed too remote and helpless as a baby, to do that — there was a feeling of spiritual calm, yet of great expectancy in the house.

Since for German Lutherans the main event of Christmas was the children's Christmas Eve service, for which we had been practicing so long, and since this was always held early, about 6:30, for the sake of the children and the family celebrations afterward, our supper of bread and cheese would be very early, at 5:00 or even 4:30. A little later, as the people began coming early for church there might be one of three knocks on the front door: 1) by Barbara, the Aunt Barbry of the whole relationship, who always brought Father a box of homemade

doughnuts; 2) by Katy Keiper, who always brought "a little something," usually a couple of homemade sausages and a pound of butter; and 3) by Lena Schirm, who frequently brought a gift of fresh meat, perhaps a roast, some ribs and a sausage wrapped in a clean white dish towel. One never-to-be-forgotten year, Father received a pint of whiskey from one of his parishioners. That pint was cherished and relished drop by drop, under the disapproving eye of my teetotaling mother.

At six o'clock Father always tuned in on the Atwater Kent radio and we listened for the magic of Big Ben, striking the hour of Christmas, midnight, in London. The excitement was almost more than I could stand and I always had to make one quick last visit to the bathroom upstairs before my brother and I were shepherded to the schoolhouse by Father, who then went into the church to put on his gown and bekin and this night (the vestry was freezing) to seat himself near the Christmas tree, so that he could watch the children's program, and then come before the altar at the end of the service for his sermon and prayer.

In the schoolhouse there would be a marvelous din, with last minute practicing. "Second voice, you're still flat; first voice not so loud," last minute reciting of pieces and showing off of new Christmas clothes — in my case, always made over from one of my mother's or sister's, but adorned with a bit of "trimming" to make it seem new (oh, how I envied Lillian's bright blue SATIN dress, with flounces) — and a chorus of coughing and sneezing. Coats were hastily thrown over our shoulders, and as the church bell began to ring, we lined up, pushing and shoving for a quick march to the church where the *Vorsteher* held out their arms for the coats which we threw any which way in the vestibule, and then tried to march down the aisle with some decorum. I recall shivering through every Christmas Eve service, though I am sure it was as much from excitement as from

cold. At least half of the church was warm in the wintertime, for there was an old tin drum of a stove, fed to capacity, which glowed so dangerously hot that the Christmas tree could never be set up near it.

The service began with a mighty 4-part effort, "Arise and shine, for thyyyyyyyy light is come," and the Old Testament prophecies and Christmas story followed in due order, interspersed with much getting up and down from the pews to sing appropriate carols. An old pump organ (later an upright piano) was brought into the front of the church for the occasion and "Teacher" exercised his playing and directing skills simultaneously. In good German and Atkins fashion there was always a bit of sentiment with the littlest voices singing the most tender parts of "Oh Come Little Children" or "Silent Night." Once the Wise Men had returned home to the East and as Mary remained pondering all these things in her heart, Father appeared before the impatient and restive congregation and in a few earnest words admonished them to be grateful, with the faith and joy of children, for the great gift of the Savior. Then there was a rustle in the church, the *Vorsteher* came out with their wash baskets of Christmas sacks and walked down the aisles, dispensing the gifts. Not one sleepy-headed child was forgotten; all roused themselves sufficiently to reach for the sacks. After a mad rush back to school — who bothered about putting on a coat now — we sorted through the stack that had been brought back by the elders and then ran home (on the other side of the church) as fast as we could, to wait at the parlor door until Father was through at church. (I remember hardly taking time to use the little commode which was kept warm behind the kitchen range, and I also remember hurrying to do this one Christmas Eve and my mother catching and holding me in that embarrassing position so that she could berate me for having told my friend Margaret that there was no Santa Claus. Even though Margaret was

older than I, her skepticism was less precocious and her mother was furious with me.) One year our approach through the parlor door was delayed by even greater excitement. We found some men of the congregation putting out a fire in the attic. The chimney had "blown out" again, and providentially they had seen the sparks and prevented an even wilder celebration.

When Father finally came in — perhaps, if it had been a good year — even bringing an extra Christmas sack for himself — we hardly let him take off his coat before we lined up at the parlor door, youngest to eldest, brother first. Oh, the

magic of that moment! The lights of the tree went on (the switch was at the door and Father and Mother would have touched it as we entered) and we stared at the beauty of the tree. Our own children would scoff at, or more courteously perhaps pity our joy over the little gilded sticks and bits of tinsel which made up the trimming, but I can never remember a childhood Christmas when our tree did not seem magical. From as far back as I can remember there was the little wooden manger scene, made in Germany and bought from Louis Lange Publishing Company in St. Louis. The gifts were not that many, nor expensive,



*The pupils of St. Stephen's Lutheran School rehearsing the 1929 Christmas Eve program in St. Stephen's Church. Director Albrecht is located in the rear and to the left of the altar, while the author's younger brother, Robbie, is standing in the front row, fourth from the right, in his shirt-sleeves. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)*

though I do remember a gorgeous red fire truck, which actually squirted water through a rubber hose for my brother — the forerunner of the Big Mac dump trucks his own son requested and received many years later. And I remember the year Santa Claus forgot to put my brother's present under the tree and Father came riding a little scooter into the parlor, to the delight of the whole family. I remember one Betty Jane doll with staring eyes and pink dress received and carefully put back in its box by the bed upstairs every night. (This bed had the only featherbed in the wintertime because I slept with my grandmother and the vision of the doll is always associated with my grandmother's chuckle as we regaled ourselves with a bit of horehound or licorice candy before plunging into the featherbed.) I know I also received a set of children's china dishes, decorated in typical German animal designs, Brementown Musician style, but the gifts which were most important to me were the books which provided the deepest enjoyment of Christmas. Father insisted upon CLASSICS, and although I remember one year in which I received a couple of volumes in the Campfire Girl series — these could be consumed, like chocolate drops, in one sitting — I was soon told that these were *shunt* (junk) and I would get no more. The denial was no hardship, since I knew that I would get bigger, longer, and better substitutes.

Our Christmas social activities, other than going to church, were few. There was no big Christmas dinner in our family since our relatives were far away and probably wouldn't have come anyhow if invited. I can recall that Father usually bought a duck or goose, which Mother roasted, and that she had *kartoffel klöse* to go with the fowl, but of the remainder of those

Christmas dinners I can recall nothing, except to be sure that there was always plenty of Mother's homebaked bread. I know there was no wine, for we never had any in our cellar except the congregational communion wine, and mixed drinks were only for "fast city folks."

During the week of vacation, the preacher's and the teacher's family would exchange at least one visit, to admire each other's gifts. We usually played in the snow together, if we weren't sick in bed, and played with each others' games. I can hardly remember toys, as such; these were too individualistic and too expensive, but games such as parchesi and lotto were always given and used. My greatest happiness during Christmas vacation was to hide away in the Morris chair in Father's study or on the old plush sofa in the parlor, a pocketful of cookies or chocolate drops stashed away, and read all the old as well as new Christmas books. At the age of eleven, Thackeray and Dickens were obvious favorites, to be followed shortly by Jane Austen and George Eliot. These delights were sometimes interrupted by my brother, who wanted to "play," by my father who wanted me to get some fresh air, or by my mother and sister who wanted me to help — but I confess I was deaf to every other voice except those of my books.

Of New Year's Eve celebrations I remember none at home. We always attended a very solemn church service, sang the hymn "The Old Year now hath passed away," and went to bed at my father's normal hour of nine (!) o'clock. My sister, I remember, was permitted to join the Walther Leaguers to go caroling and to have an oyster stew perhaps at the home of one of the carolers afterward. By the time my brother and I were old enough to go, the custom had died out. □