

# THE PALIMPSEST

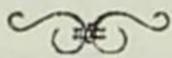
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## Christmas in Iowa

"Let's go home for Christmas." That is an airy phrase, a soap bubble of an idea that drifts into one's mind in early December, more and more brightly lit, as one grows older, with memories of earlier Christmases, the old house, the folks, the home town.

The idea hits me almost every year, and I begin to pack for *my* home town, forgetting all over again that if there is one thing harder than to make strangers believe such a town as Keosauqua, Iowa, exists, it is to get there. Trains and planes and busses avoid it, and typical Corn Belt blizzards have a way of swooping down from the North Pole to glaze the roads between it and the towns that do have railroads.

There is no road that my brother Jo can't negotiate, even though radios in neighboring states are blating, "Where is the penicillin that left Fargo yesterday by bobsled?"

And where, oh where are the Stongs who set out so gaily on the Twentieth Century from New

York? Well, I can tell you where they are for five hours of the trip — they are being batted around the Chicago railroad yards in that famous Pullman which is the answer to Mr. Robert Young's advertising campaign of several years ago: "A hog can cross the country without changing trains — but you can't." And what is happening to them shouldn't—and doesn't — happen to a hog, because a hog ping-ponged like that around Chicago for five hours would lose pounds of lard and the shipper would complain.

The Stongs, having shipped themselves, can't complain. They can just eat the limp sandwiches brought from New York — for the diner goes off early in the morning — and watch the black slush of the freight yards rolling now backward, now forward till, with a final vicious jerk, we are hooked onto the Chief and at last rolling home for Christmas.

The fat, flat farm lands of northwest Illinois with their groups of prosperous white buildings are the first glimpse of home. The place names, too, have the right sound: Galesburg of Abraham Lincoln, and the Spoon River of Edgar Lee Masters, Moline, where the plows come from. Then one more river to cross, the biggest of them all.

Clicking over the great bridge across the Mississippi, we can see the lights of Fort Madison, though we know the Chief will dump us in outer darkness, somewhere in the railroad yards with

all our luggage. The Fort Madison station was not planned for long trains like this, which are hell-bent for Hollywood and not concerned with whether we break our necks over railroad tracks or get hit by a locomotive before my brother finds us with his flashlight.

He always finds us eventually, and we are off through forty miles of blizzard. But this is, after all, Christmas Eve, and we are almost home for Christmas. The town of Donnellson slips by, a speckle of lights veiled by falling snow, and then the bridge at Farmington. It is quite dark now, and getting colder.

"How are things?" I ask my brother Jo.

"Pretty good," he says. He knows exactly what I mean. Christmas in Iowa is the climax of the year, the time of summing up. "This storm is good for business." And I know what he means. Henry Strickling's drugstore and Priebe's department store and the electrical shops will get the last-minute shopping that might otherwise have gone to Ottumwa or even to Des Moines.

We have climbed the high hill above the Des Moines River, and there is my home town, a crescent of red and green and yellow lights spooning around the river bend, where, a hundred years ago, the little steamboats connecting the Mississippi with the center of Iowa would have been discharging passengers for the town's two over-size hotels — one gone now, gone with the boats.

But that's all right. We don't get so many strangers now — hardly any at Christmastime. Everybody in Keosauqua on Christmas Eve is home for Christmas, like us. It is cozy.

The town was brighter last Christmas Eve than I had ever seen it, with outdoor Christmas trees and house lights, partly, I must admit, because the civic clubs were holding a contest for the best holiday decorations. The prizes did not total a million dollars, but it takes only a five-dollar prize to make a Keosauquan put out six dollars in materials and twenty in effort to be in the running for any competition.

We turned in at my mother's house, across the street from Jo's, and the colored electric candles sat in each window just as they sat that first winter after electricity came to town in 1903, and every year since. The distinctive smell of the house, clean, warm, welcoming, was the same too.

And there was mother, up to her ears in Christmas wrappings — she has always opened her packages the moment they came, in spite of the labels — and bright-eyed with excitement. Her main problem was oranges — the house was full of them, sent by crates and bushels from relatives and old friends, Iowans all, who in their later years go to Florida and California as inevitably as sparks fly upward.

"Of course," she says stanchly, "you *can't* have too many oranges."

"Maybe not," say I, remembering the days when an orange had just one use — to fill the toe of a Christmas stocking; three boys in our family — three oranges a year. "And grapefruit? Do you remember the first ones we ever saw, in 1906? Dad brought them from Des Moines — a new fruit, said to be a cross between an orange and a lemon, which they aren't. We tasted them cautiously, and you said you *hoped* they weren't poison."

"I never did," says mother, lying in her teeth.

Jo and his wife Eleanore and Virginia and I spent a dissipated evening playing a quarrelsome card game called "Scram," unknown to us till that moment, which Virginia recognized as a variant of blackjack, with the result that she had piled up sixty cents in winnings before I recovered and reduced my losses to a quarter.

Mother said, "It seems like the old days when you were all running around and yelling at each other." Not so very much like the old days, I thought. Cards weren't respectable in Keosauqua when I was young.

Looking out the window at half past ten, I saw the outdoor Christmas trees flickering out, and the windows of the houses back of them. A few lamps will be stealthily turned on later, while presents are put around the indoor trees and stockings are stuffed. I'm convinced parents get more fun filling the stockings than children do emptying them.

Then, soon after midnight, the last lights go out.

Other times, other Christmas Eves. If this were December twenty-fourth, a few years before the First World War, I'd be lying, not on an inner-spring mattress, but with my two cousins in a double bed at Linwood Farm, two miles from town — a bed so vast that we had to turn crossways to kick one another. It was one of those enormous black-walnut pieces — if the headboard had fallen on us we might not have been noticed among the sheets.

In this stronghold we whispered happily about the traps we had set for Santa Claus — one, a thread looped to John's toe, and another of my devising, a newspaper spread over the hearthstone on top of coarse cattle salt, guaranteed to crackle under his feet louder than that gaggle of geese that once saved Rome.

While vowing absolute wakefulness, we went to sleep.

Next morning there was no sign of the traps, not even the string on young John's toe. Santa Claus had outsmarted us. But I had other things on my mind, in particular my invaluable dollar watch with a solid gold chain — solid chain, anyway — and my silk handkerchief, violet, with embroidered fleurs-de-lis in the corners, with which I intended to overcome all the wonder girls in the second grade.

Dietetics was then unknown beyond "Lots of

milk" and "A full stummick makes a full child." The Christmas dinner was prepared accordingly, Dickensian fashion. I can remember five or six Christmas dinners in the next few years, but I can't remember a thing after one o'clock till we piled in the buggy, went to sleep, and were shoved into our beds two miles away.

The ordinary Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner for a person of about my years and swallowing ability, in 1908, would have been:

1 entire leg of a large turkey with some white meat

$\frac{1}{2}$  pt. sage and onion dressing

1 pt. mashed potatoes; gravy, with giblets fished for

$\frac{1}{2}$  pt. mashed turnips

$\frac{1}{3}$  large loaf bread; 8 oz. butter; jams, varied

1 pt. cranberries, pickles, preserves, etc.

1 pt. sundry vegetables; onions, beets, peas, limas, etc.

1 pt. milk (Doesn't count — soaks in)

1 pt. sweet cider (Same)

$\frac{1}{4}$  mince pie

Oranges, celery, olives, candy, to fill

This is far beyond the capacity of the human (a vague term) stomach, of course, but it is well within the capacity of the entire boy. This estimate is not excessive; in fact, it is timorously conservative. About halfway through the meal Great-Aunt Beatie would tell us again of a little boy of

her acquaintance who ate so much he busted his stummick and died in prolonged and horrible agonies. We never did learn whether he busted inside only or whether he spilled. But we felt nothing but contempt for the feeble wretch.

Just before I fell asleep on Christmas Eve in 1951, I thought about my father. If he were alive and running his general store — and not the post office, as he did in the last decade of his life — he would be still, at this late hour, running up and down the hill to open up again and again for some last-minute, desperate shopper. And tomorrow, while we all stuffed ourselves with turkey, he would be taking tea and toast for his invariable Christmas migraine. There are more kinds of service in a town like Keosauqua than R. H. Macy or Marshall Field or John Wanamaker ever dreamed of.

In the morning, after pancakes and country sausage and present-opening, I was encouraged by my wife and my mother to get the heck out of the way while they swept out the sea of Christmas wrappings and got back to basting the turkey.

From the front steps I could see a fine clear sweep of snow down to Main Street and a block beyond to the river. On a Flexible Flyer, now, I could make it in nothing flat, or even on that little old sled my father made me when I was three, out of a grocery box set on runners. A steering bar is not much use, anyway, at forty miles an hour,

which was about the speed the younger generation was making at that moment, down the street.

Halfway down the hill I met one small boy who was not runnerborne this morning, Jimmy Worrrell, the doctor's son. "Well, Jimmy," I said, "have a good Christmas?"

He looked at me glumly. "I've seen better." A pause. "Dad got himself an electric train — for me. I wanted a bike."

There was one other realist in town to match Jimmy. I heard about her a few minutes later, from Junior Nickelson, who was just coming out of his auto-supply-and-gadget store.

"How's business?" he answered me, waving at an almost empty display window. "Practically sold out, electric irons, fans, hair-dryers, toasters — and trains. Say, has this town got trains! You hear about Bruce?" He was speaking of Bruce Barton, our Van Buren County Hospital superintendent. "Well, his wife came in and looked over all my toy trains and the fixin's — signal towers, depots, bridges. The Bartons haven't got any kids. So I asked her, 'How old is the little boy you're giving it to?' And she looked me right in the eye and said, 'The little boy is about forty.' She was just daring me to snicker."

Too bad Virginia isn't here, I thought. I've never had an electric train myself. In my day it was Erector sets mostly, and the towers I built with them always leaned farther than the one at

Pisa, but I never intended to show up Galileo. I do have some toys at home, though, my microscope, my Army-surplus telescope, a thing that pushes out a cigarette, lights it and smokes it for me and stamps out the butt — but not one electric train.

Through the door of the drugstore I saw Henry Strickling, whose father established the store about half a century ago. Henry was tidying the few remaining Christmas cards on a counter, in a complacent way. "Hi," he said. "Just came down to look over the patent medicine shelf before the bellyaches begin. There'll be some calls for them tonight, but nothing like we used to have. Dad used to sell about twenty kinds of stomach stuff, mixtures of red pepper, soda, senna, cascara, paregoric, bromides — most of them with a very good sound alcoholic base. Very comforting, if not curative.

"Sold three bottles of castor oil last night to the three worst pessimists in town. But mostly it was gift stuff — perfume and notepaper and candy and bath salts and sachet and toilet water — and more perfume. Anybody that goes to the movies in this town for the next few weeks is going to get asphyxiated with gardenia and lilac and Memory of Sin. Dad would be surprised at how his pharmacy has turned into a gol-darned general store."

He looked up at me gravely. "I was thinking

last night about your father's store, wishing he was back in it."

"So was I," I said. "Guess I'll walk down past it now."

"Well," he said, shaking his head. Then he brightened. "You going out to Linwood today?"

I nodded. "We're all going out this afternoon."

"Good. That'll be nice for your mother. People don't congregate enough nowadays. Instead of fifteen, twenty at the table, ten makes a big crowd. Don't know where people have got to. The town had about fourteen hundred when you and I were kids, and it's got eleven hundred and four now — and several prospects I know of. Ought to be enough to fill a Christmas table."

He stood on his frosty doorstep waving at me as I turned down Main Street towards the site of B. J. STONG, VARIETY GOODS.

Henry's kindly headshake wasn't really necessary. I was not going down to look at the old building, any more than I was really seeing the black-glass-and-chromium store fronts which are the outward and visible sign of farm prosperity in the 1940's. On the sidewalk in front of B. J. STONG, VARIETY GOODS, I looked — not at the neglected, dusty windows with sacks of chicken feed behind, but back through more than forty years, to a shadowy candy counter of 1908, officially out of bounds, but always somehow open — like everything my father had — to his three

small boys. On the right wall I still saw the rows of shoe-boxes — the best work shoes St. Louis manufactured, \$2.50 a pair, or to a customer who liked to bargain, \$2.55, with a pair of socks thrown in.

Off a table there in the middle, my schoolbooks came, second or third or fourth hand from earlier generations of students who made the store a clearinghouse.

At the far back were the wallpaper racks, almost empty of wallpaper in the winter, but holding on Christmas Eve about 200 carefully labeled parcels, left till the last minute by the parents of 200 Junior G-men set on anticipating Santa Claus.

In the cubicle at the rear — lost in darkness now — my father kept his books, and *his* toys, the ones I sent him at Christmas after I grew up: a barometer that was consulted with a faith that passeth understanding by everyone in town who planned a picnic or a journey; a small radio; and a pocket watch with an alarm, which he dutifully set to remind himself of things, though the bell scared him silly every time it rang inside his pocket. "Every time the darn thing goes off I jump clear out of my chair."

As though that bell had rung again, I looked at my own watch. The turkey would be done, and if I didn't hurry home, "the skin would crackle off," a mishap that always upset mother. I trotted up the hill at a zigzag between sleds and unsea-

sonal velocipedes and feet wobbling on new roller skates.

The skin had not crackled off, but before we finished, mine almost did. Not so Gargantuan as it used to be, the Iowa Christmas dinner is still a challenge to one who has been living in the effete East for twenty-seven years. One feudal touch, praise be, was missing. "What!" I said. "No peacock?"

Mother laughed. Back in the days when her sainted father was lord of Linwood Farm, he had, after reading *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, stocked the place with peafowl, which fought the hens, scared the horses, chased us children and rent the air with hideous complaint.

Everybody was heartily sick of them before long, except grandpa, a fairly determined character. But even determined characters, when they see peacocks chasing their hens, have been known to change their minds.

On the day before Christmas, 1908, coming out the kitchen door, I saw my baronial grandfather hopping mad. Squawking at him, with tail outspread, was the largest, maddest peacock of them all. Grandpa picked up a stick and threw it. Iowans are good pitchers — witness Bob Feller.

Next day the bird appeared, brown and bulging with sage stuffing on the Haviland platter, with two-foot, shimmering tail feathers set up at the appropriate end.

The gray goose of Southern folk song had nothing on that fowl. "The knife wouldn't cut 'im, the fawk wouldn't stick 'im," if we'd dared to "thro 'im in the hawg-pen," he'd have "broke the hawgs' teeth in." As it was, he just broke our teeth in, while everybody said how beautiful his tail was. So little of him was eaten he may well have ended like the gray goose, "flyin' toward the ocean, with a long strang o'peachicks behind 'im."

Grandpa was not licked. Next Christmas we had another peacock. But we also had a turkey and a suckling pig and assorted roasts. By the year after that, the rest of the flock had disappeared, and no questions asked.

"Well," said mother obstinately on Christmas Day of 1951, "you were all very mean to papa. That peacock had a good flavor." How filial can you get?

Jo brought the car over to take us around town and out to Linwood. By rights, Lea Beggs, grandpa's hired man, ought to be out there at the curb with the surrey, waiting for us to tuck ourselves under the rainproof roof with our feet on carpet-covered hot bricks. But Jo's Packard is nice, too, and it can do a tour of the town before going two miles over the river and through the woods to Linwood.

I always like to drop in at the County Farm on Christmas to see my friends. Our County Farm is not a poorhouse, though it does have some resi-

dents who have no money. It also has a number of elderly persons, left alone and too old to run their farms, who have furnished their own rooms, made a reasonable deed to the county and moved in, knowing that for the rest of their lives they will lack for nothing — not even cribbage partners.

I was sad this Christmas that Steve was not there. My old friend Steve, the Greek popcorn seller, who, after being skinned of his last dollar and his popcorn stand by a couple of slick Illinois operators, quietly starved — almost, until the town found out about it and whisked him into a more comfortable home than he had ever known. For years I used to send Steve a hundred of the foulest cigars ever made — the brand he liked — and he sent me several pounds of hickory-nut meats, picked on the farm and shelled by his arthritic hands.

On only one other occasion did I ever hear of people being hungry in Keosauqua — a Christmas Eve when the father of a new family in town bought only corn meal at the grocery. The grocer was curious. "What are you doing with that stuff for Christmas?"

"Makin' fried mush. I got a side of bacon — partly."

"Gosh Almighty," said the grocer, and began to toss real food into a basket. "It's tough getting to town too late to raise anything but winter wheat. Next year it'll be better."

The word spread around town — fried mush on Christmas — in *Keosauqua*! The newcomers would probably have spent an easier Christmas with the sowbelly and mush than they did with the tide of visitors who poured in the next day, bringing turkey and hams and pies and dolls and Teddy bears.

Back from the County Farm, Jo turned up Courthouse Hill. The courthouse, the oldest, now, in Iowa, is of honest native limestone and brick, painted a dishonest, gloomy brown — a tall dour building looming over the lighted Christmas tree in front (Abe Lincoln and Bob Ingersoll had clients here). The small jail nearby is cozier. It is oftener empty than full, and when it isn't, it is full of a drunken driver or two — Keosauqua is tough about them, with two main highways through town — or perhaps full of somebody who has tried to sock somebody else in an argument over politics. We rode by, with the comfortable knowledge that if there was anybody in jail, he was having turkey too — with cranberry sauce.

The Van Buren County Hospital is a streamlined, modern mirage in the Keosauqua landscape, still a surprise to old-timers like me, but to the town a triumph and an Ark. Since the hospital came three years ago, five doctors have come to town. Before that, serious sickness meant an ambulance ride of eighteen miles to Fairfield, and sometimes you were Dead on Arrival. Jo turned

in at the hospital to give us a glimpse of the handsome lobby. Supt. Bruce Barton was not around. "Probably at home playing with his train," said Jo.

We drove up the Long Lane and over the Des Moines River by the Pittsburg Bridge, crossed Chequest Creek by a smaller one, and ran along the river front of Linwood. It looks about as it always has, since Grandpa Duffield came home from the Gold Rush in 1852 with enough money to buy the land and build the house of bricks from his own clay fired in his own kiln. As we turned from the river road up the long approach to the house, I was glad I, too, had dug some gold in California twenty years ago, enough to buy this old place back into the family. My digging was done in a movie studio, but it was just as strenuous as grandpa's.

The lighted house looked as it always had, warm and welcoming in the Christmas dusk. The Church Tree, where the first settlers held their services before they had a church building, is a gaunt old dying giant now.

This rock-top driveway is different from the old one — up which grandpa used to urge the horses through heavy mud with Methodist curses — "By George!" "By Jocks!" "Confound it!"

He would be surprised to know that under that "tarnation" useless rocky patch on our Ralston Branch place lay all this fine limestone, which,

crushed, has surfaced many of the county roads in addition to this driveway.

He would be surprised, too, at the new well, the water pipe to the barns, and at other changes inside the house. My partner-tenant, Cecil Ridgeway, and Mrs. Ridgeway and the young Ridgeways were grouped in the doorway, and before the "Merry Christmases" were finished, Mrs. Cecil was drawing Virginia and mother away to look at her electric kitchen and the shiny bathroom, new since rural electrification finally arrived in this section the year before.

Jo and I stayed in the kitchen with Cecil and the kids, every one of them a good farmer except, perhaps, the baby, and even he had loaned his nursing bottles to the weak new-born lambs that Mrs. Cecil brings into the kitchen every spring.

Grandpa would have liked those children, maybe better than he liked us. For my cousins and brothers and I were farmers only under protest, especially I.

"Well, Cecil," I said, somewhat timidly, "how are things?" I glanced at his right arm. I had not seen him since he had caught it in a hay baler and had won a long fight against amputation, while farming nearly five hundred acres of vigorous, demanding Iowa soil.

"Fine," he said. "The barns are full and we're going to have a big crop of sheep and hogs and cattle, come spring." He glanced down at his

arm too. "I'm getting fair use of it — and my left arm's mighty good."

As gallant a remark as one now a part of legend in Keosauqua — the answer made by Thad Sherod when, just after his restaurant burned down without insurance, someone asked him with clumsy sympathy, "How are things?"

"O.K.," said Thad. "I had a good breakfast, and it ain't time for dinner yet."

"It's time for supper," said mother, coming back from the front parlor, which she always likes to visit when she is at Linwood because my father courted her there. "I've been standing in the bay window looking at the river and thinking — it hasn't changed, though everything else has."

"But it has changed," I said. "It's added twenty-two acres to this farm since I owned it."

"That isn't what I meant," said mother, and of course it wasn't.

Mrs. Ridgeway wanted us to stay and eat with them, but mother said, "I've got half a turkey at home, and when the children go back East, what will I do with it?"

So we got into the car and drove down toward the changing, unchanging river. There were no sleighs on the ice tonight, but our sleigh was safe back there in the carriage house, where it has always been since 1890. And the same stars were coming out over my home town.

PHIL STONG