

TRACING *Pasts*

# Christmases past were a family time of year

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Christmas in New England was always a magical time when I was a child. The snow covered everything with a soft white blanket, making it look like a storybook winter wonderland. The season began when my mother sat down at the kitchen table with her Christmas card list and began writing her cards. It took her many days because her list was long, as she sent a card to everybody who mattered. The cards we received were taped to the front room door.

My father bought our tree about a week before Christmas, and it sat on the back porch in a pail of water to allow time for the branches to open. A few days before Christmas, my father would bring the tree inside and stand it in a pail of wet sand. It had to be watered every day to prevent it from drying out. Once in the house, my father would cut small branches from the bottom of the tree to fill in any bare spots to make it look better.

The fun part of the Christmas tree was decorating it. This was a family affair. My father had the main job of putting the light strings on the tree, and then we would all hang ornaments. The

hardest part was putting the foil tinsel on the tree because it would cling to everything, including us. When we were young, we would take a handful at a time and throw it on the tree. As we got older and it became important for the tree to look just right, we carefully placed the tinsel, one strand at a time. It was very time-consuming, but definitely worth it.

Our only other decorations were electric candles placed in the front room windows. No one decorated or put lights outside, but practically everyone put the candles in their windows.

The Christmas tree stayed in the living room until the feast of the Epiphany. After that Sunday we would remove each ornament and place it in its box to be put away for another year. And the tinsel was removed carefully, one strand at a time, to be reused the next year.

As I grew up in a Catholic French Canadian community, we observed many of the traditions of that religion and heritage. On Christmas Eve we always attended midnight Mass, where I got to march into the church with the choir dressed as angels with long white dresses and wings too! We entered singing "Les Anges dans nos Campagnes" followed

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by other songs in French and in Latin. We always sat in the first pews of the church with the girls on the left in front of the crèche so we had a good view when the infant Jesus was placed in the manger. The boys were on the other side of the church — boys and girls never sat next to each other! After midnight Mass, we returned home and were allowed to open one gift.

My mother was busy all year long knitting, and everyone would get a hat, scarf and a pair of mittens, and most often also a special sweater for Christmas. We received one toy each year, and it was usually something that we really wanted. One was year I received a Tony doll. She had real hair that you could wash and comb and curl. She was beautiful,

and I loved her. When I was a little older, I got a desk with a lamp that I used until I married and left home.

My paternal grandparents always spent Christmas at our house. Mémère and pépère Jordan came over in the morning, and we opened our presents. We always got a brand new \$2 bill from them and thought about everything we could buy with that much money. In the end, though, we usually put it in our piggy banks to use for something that we really, really wanted. Saving was instilled in us at a very early age.

Our dinner was a turkey and our stuffing was based on the traditional Canadian meat dressing that my mother called "toutcaire." It was made with

hamburger meat, mashed potatoes and salt and pepper, and it was placed inside the turkey. It was so good, we never had leftovers. We also had mashed potatoes, homemade rolls, vegetables — though I don't remember which because I did not eat cooked vegetables when I was growing up — and, of course, dessert. My favorite was minced meat pie.

One of our traditions was to sing Christmas carols after our heavy turkey dinner. I had enough songbooks for everybody. I started off by selecting the song. I don't think any of us could really sing, but we did it anyway, and I enjoyed it even if nobody else did.

Christmas was not commercialized as it is today. Many people made their gifts, putting their hearts and time into something special for each person on their list, and family gatherings were the norm. You could not buy a tree until December. There were no decorations in window displays in the stores until close to Christmas. There was no round-the-clock Christmas music for months before Christmas, making you eager for the holidays to be over. It was a time for family and friends to gather together and share their special day.