

Candy canes began as straight white sticks of sugar candy used to decorated the Christmas trees. A choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral decided have the ends bent to depict a shepherd's crook and he would pass them out to the children to keep them quiet during the services. It wasn't until about the 20th century that candy canes acquired their red stripes.

An Old Fashioned St. John's Christmas

Long, long ago when I was a young boy who lived in St. John's, and to whom every other place in the world was referred to simply as "away", there was always snow for Christmas.

Old men lounging on the Mill Bridge would sniff the damp winds of late November and agree confidently, "This year it will be a green Christmas for sure." But they were always wrong.

Some morning in December when we youngsters were feeling the first vague stirrings of Christmas excitement, we would awaken under our mountain of soft multi-colored homemade quilts to find the bedroom window delicately laced with frost.

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"It's started!"

This to my younger brother with whom I slept heads and tails. We bounded from bed, oblivious of the cold that had penetrated every cranny of the gabled upstairs while we slept, and placing our mouths close to the ice-powdered window, assaulted it with strong puffs of hot breath until tiny peepholes appeared. Then with one eye squinting through the opening we beheld the swirling snow.

"It's going to be a big one!" I said. My brother exhaled against the glass.



Christmas caroling began as an old English custom called Wassailing - toasting neighbors to a long and healthy life.

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"Perhaps we'll get a half-holiday," he said hopefully.

Time off from school was the first demonstrable benefit of an old-time snowstorm. But first, since there was no radio to report that schools were closed, we had to make it to the school in order to be told that it was all right to return home.

So began the complicated preparations before lunging out like Arctic explorers into the drifting whiteness.

First, the huddling around the kitchen stove while the splits crackled, the coal was added gradually, and the rolled oats, soaked overnight, were moved to the front damper. Gradually the heat pushed back the all pervading chill and the pleasant breakfast smells added to our sense of comfort and security.


Surely every mother born shares the same lexicon of admonishing phrases.

"Eat up."

"You need a good breakfast to keep you warm." "Wrap yourselves up well."

"Wear your mittens."

Penguin Gift Tower



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"Don't forget your rubbers."

How could anyone forget those rubbers! Great rolled red soles, heavy black tops with tongues that reached up over the laces of our heavy boots.

And then, another motherly quotation. "Use your hands to put them on." A silly suggestion, since after much practice, a sharp forward thrust of the foot, coupled with the right pressure on the heel and the rubber slipped into place with the absolute minimum of physical effort.

And the neckties!

Why undo them every night when they had to be tied up again in the morning? So make the opening just big enough to slip over the head and tighten the knot. An eminently sensible arrangement, even though after a time the knot tended to disappear under the collar tab.

For trousers we wore heavy melt on cloth breeches. They were standard dress for almost every boy in those days. Laced just below the knee, leather patches between the legs and flared on each side. They made us look like an untidy bunch of

Bengal Lancers especially when the wool knee socks, an integral part of the outfit, slipped down around the ankles as they almost invariably did. Add a V-necked sweater, a rumpled jacket (loosely referred to as a blazer), cover with a windbreaker and we were ready for the real ordeal.

If mothers share common phrases, they also have a common faith in safety pins.

"Let me pin your mittens to your coat so you won't lose them." "Wrap your scarf up around your nose and mouth. Now, pin it in place. I don't want you to catch cold."

Always the same ritual and always the same aftermath. A dozen steps from the door and out came the pins. How else could a fellow throw snowballs? And wouldn't you look a real sissy walking along with only your eyes showing through a narrow slit between your scarf and the salt-and-pepper cap, complete with ear flaps?

Oh, those salt-and-pepper caps. Rough black and white material on the outside and a red silk lining.

The manufacturers and mothers believed the dignified way to wear such distinctive headdress was flat on the head like a dinner plate with not the slightest tilt to either left or right.

We boys felt differently, however. The best sartorial authorities among us dictated that the cap must be worn at a debonair, rakish angle with as much of the material as possible pulled toward the right ear, and the peak of the cap, designed so meticulously to be an almost straight-across visor, was unacceptable until it had been skillfully manipulated to drop visibly on both sides.

"If you keep that up you'll break the peak," Mother warned.

And she was invariably right - but so much the better. Now the cap fitted snugly and stylishly to the head and when a group of us gathered under the street light to play Hoist Your Sails, we looked like a pack of Irish revolutionaries plotting to blow up London Bridge.

But now, on the morning of the first snow, we accepted among all the other instructions the maternal order, "Straighten your cap," and then stepped boldly into the swirling whiteness, feeling for the entire world like our Newfoundland hero, Captain Bob Bartlett, leaving his Arctic base and heading straight for the North Pole.

And St. John's during an old-time snowstorm was almost as silent as the frigid North. There were few automobiles in those days and all were quickly immobilized as snowdrifts blocked narrow streets. Even the streetcars seemed to move on flannelled wheels as they edged along behind the sweeper, a marvelous contraption with a stiff revolving brush at each end that looked for everything in the world like a frozen porcupine, but made the only path through the deepening snow along the entire route the streetcars traveled.

A silent, snow-laden city. But there was an exception. Bells.

To this day I would probably confound any psychiatrist seeking to give me a word-association test.

"What word do you think of when I mention 'Christmas'?" he would ask.

"Bells," I would answer.

"What word does 'snow' bring to mind?" Again, "Bells."

"Walking to school?"

"Bells."

"Horses?"

"Bells."

Always it is bells that keep ringing in my memory and if those winters of over 45 years ago have triggered a perpetual echo, it is of bells.

Mostly, I think, it is sleigh bells. The silvery, rapid tinkle from the sleek horses of the wealthy, prancing past, hauling magnificent sleighs, and the occupants bundled under their great fur robes, like so many teddy bears traveling in style to their winter hibernation.

Then there was the dun metallic clunk of the work-horse bells, tolling only occasionally as the poor beasts, their flanks steaming from the exertion, labored up Palks Hill or Leslie Street or Alexander Street, dragging a quarter of coal or a puncheon of molasses or a load of birch billets to what were both topographically and socially the Higher Levels of old St. John's.

And there were other bells also. Bells on our coasters on which we slid belly buster down those same hills. Bells on the inside of bull's-eye shop doors to alert the store owner in the back room that someone outside was ready to buy. (Sometimes, just for fun, we simply opened the door, shook it a few times to make the bell rattle, and we ran.)

And we mustn't forget the cow bells. "Cow bells in St. John's in winter?" you ask incredulously. And I answer smugly, "Of course."

You could not run a raffle without a cow bell. And old St. John's had plenty of raffles, especially at Christmastime. Turkeys, geese and chicken hung shamelessly naked in windows of these havens of hope for the needy and the greedy. A five-cent ticket could win you your Christmas dinner, and at the same time you could be helping the orphans, the aged, the crippled, the poor people of some remote outport, and innumerable other unfortunates.

It was the charitable aspects of these organizations that gave even rock-ribbed Protestants a warm glow of satisfaction as they eagerly indulged in the heavy business of gambling they would denounce vigorously under any other circumstances.

But the competition to help one's fellow man was intense among the many raffles. The parcel-laden passersby had to be persuaded to aid your particular philanthropy, and hence the cow bells.

Outside each raffle stood a bull-voiced huckster vigorously shaking a cow bell and hollering at the top of his lungs, "Three for five and seven for ten! The women can try as well as the men! Turkey, goose and chicken, a winner every time!"

And so it went, up and down the length of Water Street. The cow bells, the sleigh bells and the steady clang, clang of the streetcar bell creating the general impression that a tone-deaf extrovert had been let loose in a belfry where all the bells were out of tune.

Yet, the effect was exhilarating, for there was within it all a kind of simple harmony, a truce between the old town and the winter that they would make every effort to live with each other and as far as possible enjoy each other's company.

This brings me back to the first snowfall.

Once out into the drifts, some already reaching to the knees, the first task was to get rid of the safety pins. Out they came from the mittens and the scarf, the salt-and-pepper cap was properly adjusted and down you plopped into the engulfing snow, rolling in it as if you were severely afflicted and the snow had magic, health-giving properties.

And perhaps it did.

The blood surged, the breath came faster and became more visible in the cold, crisp air, the cheeks reddened, the nose ran and was wiped deftly and often on the backs of the homespun mittens.

"Let's find the boys," I said, for this kind of adventure brought out the herd instinct and we made for the usual rendezvous outside Mrs. Reddy's store.

Inside my now soggy mitten was one of those tiny Newfoundland five cent pieces. "Be sure to buy a couple of apples for recess," my mother had told my brother and me. But of course we knew we couldn't, and I think she did too. How could apples compete at Mrs. Reddy's with milky licks, rum-and-butter kisses and, above all, Banner caramels?

Banner caramels! Hard as iron, chocolate covered, only a cent each, and if consumed properly, guaranteed to last at least an hour before finally melting in your mouth.

Now, forces having been joined and the recess money spent prematurely, off we crept single file along the unclean sidewalk, frequently pushing each other into the drifts or simply plunging in voluntarily with unrestrained enthusiasm.

"You think we're going to get a half-holiday?" The question was whipped along the wind. "If we don't I'll pip off." Shouts of approval all along the line. When there was a snowstorm it was considered an inalienable right to be let out of school early. It was not very logical for we simply stayed out in the snow anyway, but a right it was and one not to be surrendered lightly.

Up Patrick Street we went single file like the gold-hungry prospectors in our history book making their way over the mountains into the Yukon.

"Get yourself good and wet," cried one veteran of these anti-school campaigns. "Then they'll have to send us home."

The advice was superfluous for by now knee socks hung limply around our ankles and the legs of our long drawers were wet and soggy as if we had waded through a surging torrent. Whether it was our bedraggled appearances or the fact that the teachers also welcomed the day off so near Christmas (as we often suspected), we all gathered in assembly, the principal mumbled a short prayer, we sang something about all things being bright and beautiful, and were told we could go home.

I have often thought that God is secretly on the side of school boys for we had barely begun the trek back along the tortuous route we had come when the snow stopped, the winds died and the watery winter sun did its best to make up for lost time.

"Let's go to Water Street," I said, and there was a chorus of approval. Now it was down over Springdale Street, chasing after horses and sleighs, leaping on the runners until irritated drivers scared us off with a gentle flick of their whip. Where the snow had become hard and slippery on the steeper inclines, we slithered up and down until we had a surface as smooth as glass. Then we slid down it one foot ahead of the other with all the grace of an Alpine skier braving the upper reaches of the Matterhorn.

Tiring at last of our sport we moved on, leaving the slippery patch to trap some unsuspecting pedestrian, unless, as often happened, a nearby resident ended the slope's usefulness by covering it with ashes from the kitchen stove.

Oh, there was so much to see on Water Street during those long-ago Christmases. In fact, the great thoroughfare, great to us at least, excited all the senses.

I have spoken of the sounds, the bells and the clamor. And then there were the smells, the exotic smells in the fruit and candy stores, the pungent smell of leather, oakum and tar in the hardware stores, and in the general stores an indescribable mixture of the aromas of dry goods, groceries, and the ever-present whiff of salt cod that penetrated even the most high-class emporiums, seeping in from the adjacent harbor wharves where all manner of vessels called enticingly to the wanderlust in every boy who has ever lived with the sea at his doorstep.

But of all the senses it was sight that made Water Street the wonderland of the Christmas childhood. Intricate old-world lettering over the shops proclaiming proudly the names of the owners. More names in gold on the windows and doors. The sides of old store buildings converted to primitive billboards - importers and exporters said one, general dealer another; harness maker, ironmonger, cakes and pastries, all proclaimed their trade or lines of business, and the totality of the impressions told the school boy better than any lesson of the great mercantile history of this oldest street in all of North America.

"What do you want for Christmas?" we asked each other as we traversed this magic place. And it was a mark of the times that it was always asked and answered in the singular.

"What do you want?" really meant "What one thing above all others are you hoping for?" So the choice was excruciatingly difficult and minds were changed at each shop window.

The Champion steel-runnered coaster at Knowling's gave way to the Chum Boys Annual at Dicks and the book in turn lost out to the newly introduced tube skates at Martin-Royal Stores.

Down one side and up the other we went, detouring at Beck's Cove to see the men at work shoeing horses in the forge on George Street. Are blacksmiths always kind to children? Any I have known were. Always they let us enter the forge to enjoy the heat and sometimes to pump the bellows, to watch the iron turn red hot and be hammered into shape and to marvel as the horses stood on three legs as the hoof was trimmed and the sharp new shoes skillfully applied.

And now that I think of it, almost everyone in St. John's was kind in those faraway days. We wandered unhindered in and out of stores. People were never too hurried to ignore our questions and a "Merry Christmas, Mister!" always drew the cheery response, "The same to you, son!"

Back home, after the day-long reconnaissance, came the moment of truth. Subtly, parents had to be advised about what that one important present ought to be. What Santa put in the stocking was separate, of course. An apple, an orange, hard candy, a small mechanical toy or two, and the inevitable mittens.

But even the most devout believer in Santa Claus knew that hints regarding the big gift had to be passed to parents as insurance, if nothing else. And as a rule, the insurance paid off.

And then the year came and it came early for me, when I realized that my world had changed, and that hints would not any longer be enough.

Suddenly one Christmas, my father was no longer there. At 13, I was an orphan, the eldest of six.

Was it my imagination or was the wind colder now, the snow less inviting and the bells muted? Why was I more cautious in response to the question "What do you want for Christmas?" I guess I knew - all of us knew - that things had changed.

So we could not pay the man to bring a Christmas tree as we used to. Very well, I could cut one myself, on the South Side Hill and drag it home on my sled.

Mother made fudge to replace the store-bought candy. I took some of mine, wrapped the pieces in used tinsel, and gave them back to her in an old chocolate box.

We made fancy lanterns out of wrapping paper colored with crayon and a star out of the cardboard of a shoe box, covered with the silver wrapping from a candy bar.

And then, magical things began to happen.

Relatives we scarcely remembered sent presents, not the usual utilitarian things to dull a child's expectant heart, but toys like red fire engines with real sirens, games of Ludo and Snakes and Ladders and even a pair of the new tube skates.

And friends we had not thought of as friends began dropping by... one with a chicken, another with a cake. Our grocer, a dear old Scot, threw in a box of

Christmas crackers even though we were two months behind with the bill. And the woman next door found a pair of overshoes for me that her son had mysteriously outgrown, even though they were brand new.

Well, that Christmas Eve with Mother alone was different of course, but far happier than we had expected. There was good food, there were presents and there was a tree in its usual place between the organ and the big Morris chair in the parlour.

There were no electric lights for Christmas trees then, but there were candles, real ones, and special holders that clipped onto the tree branches. My father had always reminded us that they were dangerous as well as beautiful. Only he would light them and then only for a few minutes at a time while we turned off all the lights and gazed at the glorious sight.

But now Father was gone.

And as we brought out the box of decorations, I watched more intently than the others as the familiar ornaments were put in place - the fragile glass balls on the tips of the branches, the delicate birds with their plumed tails placed closer to the centre and then the candleholders.

One after the other, Mother put them in place and inserted the birthday type candles and turning to me, she passed me the matches.

"Light the candles, Son," she said. "You're the man of the house now."

Well, the long road of memory has many signposts. Each marks an incident, an event, an encounter that we weave into the puzzling mosaic of our total existence. And as we look over the intricate patterns on a birthday, an anniversary, or other special occasion, we are filled with wonderment at the variety, the richness and the value of life.

For me, the first dawning of this awareness came on that night long ago when an awkward 13-year-old boy became a man in a matter of minutes in the flickering candlelight from an old-fashioned Christmas tree.