

Silent Night was written in 1818, by an Austrian priest Joseph Mohr. He was told the day before Christmas that the church organ was broken and would not be prepared in time for Christmas Eve. He was saddened by this and could not think of Christmas without music, so he wanted to write a carol that could be sung by choir to guitar music. He sat down and wrote three stanzas. Later that night the people in the little Austrian Church sang "Stille Nacht" for the first time.

## The Christmas Concert



The day's work was over, the evening meal finished and the stove was filled to the top with green alders that would burn just fast enough to keep a resting man comfortable.

Uncle Bill lay on the outside edge of a bunk with his long rubbers under his head for a pillow and listened to the younger men and teenage boys haphazardly discussing the events of the day. The talk was of the number of sticks of wood cut and hauled, the condition of the snow-covered hauling roads, the rabbits that were caught in the snares tailed the day before as well as those that were smart enough to escape, and even the jays that had invaded the clearing where they boiled the kettle for their mid-day meal.

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The teenage boys forced to spend their holidays in this way did not object to this enforced labor for if a young man wished to attend school this was expected of him. Few ever contemplated a world where school holidays were idled away instead of being used to help out one's family. During a lull in the conversation, young Danny asked Uncle Bill what the Christmas holiday season was like when he was a boy.



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Well, boys, the old man began, I've seen a lot of Christmases come and go but generally speaking they are much the same now as when I was a boy. We all have more now, for there's more to be had, but the feeling is the same. When Christmas comes you learn to enjoy what you have, be thankful you have it and to share what little you have with those who have less.

In three score years, I have known a lot of bad Christmases from the point of view of the worldly goods we had, but we always tried to bring some happiness to everyone by cutting a few corners here and there. On Christmas morning everyone in the family had something, not very much I suppose by the standards of today, but certainly something. Do you know what was special about those Christmases? It was the feeling that everyone had that what they received was due to a sacrifice on the part of someone else. The children today get what they ask for, but they know that very little sacrifice on the part of their relatives is required to give them what they want and so whatever they get is not appreciated.

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However hard the times were, Christmas was fun. We entertained ourselves at the school concert. We got a glass of syrup or lime juice with cake and cookies in every home in the village. On every night except Sunday, from Christmas Day to Old Christmas Day we went mummering. The young folk would go all around the village right after supper and around eight o'clock those past their mid-teens and the adults would begin. We always tried to get someone with an accordion to accompany us and we would have a "step" in every house. However bad the times were, there was nearly always a drop of shine on the go and in many of the houses that we visited we were given a drink. Some young men and women who had lots of energy took a punt, rowed across the tickle and visited every house there as well.

When we lived on the islands, our lives were completely different from what they are up here in the bay. The work was different, the language was different, the homes were different and we had different ways of entertaining ourselves. Many of you who were grown men before you were shanghaied by that fellow Smallwood, will remember the island Christmas concerts.

Those concerts were recognized by all as the highlight of the Christmas season. The children who took part got a chance to show off in front of their relatives and friends. The teenagers, during the many practice sessions, got an opportunity to meet with their opposites away from the eagle eyes of their parents. In a school that was very dimly lit with one or two

kerosene lamps, there was always an opportunity for a hug or a kiss in a darkened corner when no one was looking. If you carried out a survey along the whole shore among the people over fifty you will find out, I'm sure, that a large percentage started their courting during the long practice sessions for the Christmas concert. It is certainly understandable when you consider that a number of teenage boys and girls were waiting around together during the time when others were practicing their parts.

The closer to Christmas Eve it got, the more excited became those who were taking part and the more expectant those who would make up the audience. However, the old schoolhouse had to undergo certain alterations. A temporary stage had to be built at one end and a curtain rigged that could be hauled back and forth. The big inside jib of Uncle Noah's bully was hung from the ceiling in one corner of the stage for a dressing room and seating accommodation provided for the total population of the island with extras for those who would undoubtedly arrive from the nearby villages.

A considerable proportion of the populations of the island village were actual participants. Many boys and girls from five to ten years of age delivered short recitations. Older children took part in skits or sang and many young adults, married and single, participated if they were known to have any particular talent in dialogue or song. Everyone who took part got a hearty endorsement for a large percentage of the audiences were relatives and were expected to be generous with their acclaim.

It was the general custom at these Christmas concerts to provide for a visit from Santa Claus, which occurred immediately after the last item on the programme came to an end. There was no long waiting period which seems to be general in big cities. I remember a time last fall when I was visiting my son in St. John's seeing a crowd of men, women and children lined up by the side of Prince Philip Drive from nine-thirty to twelve o'clock waiting for Santa to make an appearance. That was two and one half hours and I could not help thinking that in that much time, the island concert could start and end and Santa come and go with still time to spare. Every boy and girl in the village was remembered and at times also there were gifts for other people. Many a teenage boy, too shy to present a Christmas gift to his favorite girl, secretly bought and wrapped a present to be delivered by Santa after the Christmas concert.

The concert was not staged to raise funds but simply to provide entertainment for the whole population of the island village. However, there was a very small admittance fee, usually five or ten cents, which I presume went to the local school board.

The annual Christmas concert is just another example of how the small, isolated island communities provided for their own needs. Just as they built their own homes and boats, grew their own vegetables and made their own clothing, they also attempted to create their own entertainment. The local teacher usually provided the leadership, all the young people took part and the whole community became the audience.

The various practice sessions gave the young people something to do during the long nights of early winter. It provided the young men with the opportunity to meet with the young women. It gave all those who took part the opportunity to speak, act or

sing before an audience and it became one night during the long winter when the men left their knitting needles and the women their mat hooks.

Christmas, as it were, was the end of the season. The fish was all shipped, the supplies were in for the winter and the Labrador men and the inshore men were all getting ready for the next season. Well, boys, in those days we had less for ourselves and we had less to share but the little we did have we did share. Among all the things that are shared during this time of the year perhaps the one that we had more of and shared most freely was our Christmas spirit.