

Far from being Scrooge-like, we want people to enjoy the festivities and make the most of the season in a way which helps keep everyone safe, fit and healthy.

Was Christmas Ever "What it used to be"?

"Christmas is not what it used to be," we wail. "It's just a commercial farce. Just matters of get, get, get and buy, buy, buy, and the more money you spend the better. Christmas has been commercialized beyond repair. Ah, for the good old days."

I wonder if Christmas was ever "what it used to be".

Don't we all think of the good things that happened to us in childhood as the absolute ultimate in happiness? And won't our own children, in ten, twenty, thirty years time, look back on the Christmases of the swinging sixties and moan that Christmas is just not what it used to be?

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Children, after all, are the lucky ones. It's not their worry if we get all our cakes baked in time, polish off our housecleaning and complete our gift list. They just know that, come Christmas Eve, a kind of magic will transform the house that has been in slings for the past month, the shimmering tree will be in place and mother will wear a smile again instead of that grim look around her mouth. We older ones forget that this will happen, but the children remember. And, cynic though I am sometimes, never have I been able to escape being possessed by that shining Christmas Eve feeling. It comes suddenly, and it doesn't last very long, but I do think that life would be much poorer without it.



Make a Christmas list: plan what meals you will be making in advance and what ingredients you need, write a list and stick to it - don't be tempted to add in extras when you get to the shops.

[Holiday Gifts & Gift Baskets](#) is your one-stop shop for holiday shopping throughout the year. With ideas for kids of any age and adults too, you are sure to find a great present on our site. We feature only the most unique holiday gift baskets, gourmet food, and more, with easy online ordering and toll free customer service available 24 hours a day. For our corporate customers, we have an easy to use bulk order form and we even offer several customization options and corporate discounts. Contact us for details.

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Some of my most unforgettable Christmases were spent in that part of St. John's that doesn't really exist any more. I'm talking about the old South Side, the little town within a town that vanished a few years ago to make way for harbor development.

People Pleaser Christmas Basket



The people have spoken, and they choose... this gourmet gift basket for Christmas! This best selling basket is a true charmer, presenting the perfect blend of sweet and savory treats for the season. Our wicker basket is overflowing with Tomato Basil Salami, Sharp Cheddar Cheese, Water Crackers, North Carolina Roasted Peanuts, Snack Mix, Dutch Cheese Butterfly Biscuits, English Teas, and Old North State Blend Coffee. We didn't forget dessert either, and we packed plenty of sweetness into this gift as well, including Chocolate Truffles, Scottish Shortbreads, Almond Roca, Ballerina Cookies, and German Pound Cake.

Price: \$ 45.00

[Buy Now!](#)

Perhaps even more than the first snowfall, an important harbinger of Christmas in those days was the great paper caper. All the women were unanimous in the opinion that Christmas just could not be celebrated properly unless at least some of the rooms were freshly papered. There was no such thing as a living room then, or at least we didn't call it that. Some folks called it the parlor, others the sitting room but by far the majority referred to it as the front room, often shortened to simply "the room". Whatever it was called, that was one room that had to be papered. Housewives studied samples of patterns, made their decision and then trudged over to make their selection. When the South Side women had money to spend they didn't say they were going shopping or going downtown or going on a buying spree. They just said they were going "over" and everyone understood. Although we had to cross the Long Bridge every time we went to church or to the movies or to visit north side friends we never said we were going over unless we planned to go shopping. And that little word still conjures up for me visions of shops with long counters and high stools to sit on when your feet hurt, grocery stores where you could pick out your own sweet biscuits from big wooden boxes and small ice cream parlors where the most delicious sodas in the world were made by tipping a bottle of Iron beer over a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

But to get back to the all-important Christmas papering. Well, when the selection was finally made, including an appropriate border, the work began. First the old paper had to be taken off (in some ambitious years the room was stripped "to the boards") but before even that could be done all the pictures and ornaments had to be removed from the wall, and this was usually a job for the children. King William of Orange, on his never-ending trip across the Boyne, was taken from his place of honor over the mantelpiece, all the mottoes were removed and the china ornaments were put carefully away where they wouldn't be broken. When all the preparations had been made it was time to make the paste, for the wallpapers in those days didn't have the conveniently sticky underside that they have today. The paste was

made from flour and water, and how they got the lumps out of it was - and always will be - a mystery to me. Talk about papering the parlor! In our house you couldn't see anyone for paste! But somehow, some time, the room was finally finished, and my elders' loud sigh of relief indicated to me that Christmas could come as fast as it wanted to now.

All the other preparations were made that are common to most people everywhere when Christmas is approaching. Cakes were baked, puddings steamed, and during the war, parcels were packed for the boys overseas, for there seemed to be at least one missing from every home on the south side. When I was very young, in the early days of the war, I was angry at the Germans because we couldn't have lemon syrup for Christmas any more. To this day I don't understand why, but I remember hearing my aunt, an expert syrup maker, say sadly that since the war started you couldn't get the proper ingredients. And the bought lemon syrup was a very poor substitute. The war's been over for a long time now and I still haven't tasted that unforgettable homemade lemon syrup. I wish someone would give me the recipe.

Of course, most of the men on the South Side were more concerned about a more bracing kind of liquid refreshment. Even those who were very sober and sedate all year generally managed to persuade themselves that a "little drop O' stuff for Christmas" was different. The women, who considered the taking of strong drink an indulgence for men only, could usually be persuaded to take a small glass of port wine at Christmas time and blueberry and rice wine, being homemade, didn't really count, although some of it had an almighty kick to it. The children had to be content with ginger wine, which was wine in name only. Although it nearly burned the throats out of us we couldn't imagine a Christmas without it.

Sometimes I wonder how many of our family worries and irritations really touch our children. Since I've grown older I've often heard my father speak of the time during the depression when his pitifully small salary was cut again. But, looking back, I can't even remember which Christmas that was, so it couldn't have been very different from any other so far as I was concerned. With the carefree selfishness of childhood, I suppose I didn't notice that his coat was shabby that year or that my mother put a new collar on last year's good dress instead of buying another one. I had my new frilled yellow organdy dress, though, and shiny black patent-leather shoes. I don't think they wanted me to know how hard it was to find the money for them.

In the last few days before Christmas the grown-ups seemed to lose their minds, muttering under their breath that this year things would never be ready in time and shooing the children out of the way. By the day before Christmas Eve, with school, concerts and most of the big preparations behind us, the tension eased a little. We called it Christmas Eve Eve. Many turkeys and geese, traditional gifts of employers to employees, began to arrive on that day; most of them delivered in horse-drawn carts whose jingling bells announced their arrival. Cookies and fudge were made then, too, with mothers and aunts wearing out their brains trying to think of new places to hide them from ever-searching fingers. The men of the family were a little later than usual returning from work that night, but the women were much more understanding than they were at any other time of year.

When I try to sort out my feelings in that long-ago time, I think the strongest one in our house was: "If only everyone in the world could be as lucky as we are."

I don't remember if I ever heard this sentiment expressed in so many words, but it was there, as real as the Christmas tree, and it was shared by everyone who lived under our roof. We didn't have very much, just a tall, narrow, rented house joined to a lot of other tall, narrow, rented houses but there was a spirit there that seemed to be especially prevalent at Christmas time. We were ordinary people, living in close proximity to a lot of other ordinary people, but somehow few of us ever felt ordinary. It's beyond me to explain why.

Nowadays, we often complain that people don't just drop in any more, but wait to be invited. Sometimes, fearful that I've been painting the past in too rosy a hue again, I ask myself if they ever did just "drop in."

I can state firmly that on the South Side they certainly did, especially at Christmas time. Christmas Eve was the men's night. Late in the afternoon the callers began to come, some of them arriving while we were in the middle of our pork-chop supper, without which no Christmas Eve would be complete. When this happened my mother and my aunt would look at each other with resignation, raising their eyebrows and lifting their shoulders. But it would not do to make the visitors unwelcome. They were ushered into the resplendently papered front room where newspapers were still spread carefully over the recently scrubbed floor. And there they would sit and talk and drink and sit some more.

One Christmas Eve in particular I remember there was one caller who didn't seem to want to go home. My mother, anxious not to be inhospitable but impatient to get started on the tree trimming, asked him gently at one point: "Mr. H-, Mrs. H- will be wondering where you've got to." I'll never forget his rather bleary but unwavering eyes when he looked at her and said slowly: "You want me to go home, don't you? But I'm not going." Poor Mom, defeated for once, retired to the kitchen and that night it was later than usual before the tree decoration was complete.

When we finally crawled into bed it certainly wasn't to sleep, for then the visiting began in earnest. Groups of men made their way from house to house, increasing in numbers and volume as they went along. One night, after I had finally dropped off to sleep, I was awakened by what seemed to me at that time the most beautiful singing in the world. I crept out to the stairs and looked over the banister to see a group of men in the hallway led by silver-haired Mr. Neddy Harvey, a gentleman if there ever was one. "O Come all ye faithful" was their favorite carol and the roof almost fell off when they came to the line "O come let us adore Him." It left me with the feeling that they were really on their way to the stable to worship the Infant King.

Next they sang that loveliest of all carols. "Once in royal David's city," and then my grandfather started an old song about England's valleys and hills in which the other men, most of whom like him had never seen England, joined lustily and tearfully. That was followed, naturally enough, by "Carry me back to dear old Blighty" and then somebody suggested "Eternal Father, strong to save". Almost everyone there had a close relative in the Royal Navy. The women joined in then, their work forgotten, and there on the stairs by myself, I sang too, "Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee for those in peril on the sea."

Who can describe Christmas Day?

I don't think I'll even try.

Christmas Eve is, and always has been, my own special time. During the week that followed the big day, visiting was begun in earnest; the women entering into full activity now that they could at last rest on their laurels. The time had come to sample the cakes of their friends, savoring the rich taste but nevertheless remaining convinced that their own were just a little better. We children kept a record of how many places we "had our Christmas" as we called it, and there was usually one day, shortly after Christmas, when we all felt a little squeamish. Then the thought of plummy cakes, rich shortbread cookies and lemon syrup would make us shudder. We were soon ready for another round, however. As one of my mother's friends used to say: "It's worth a bilious attack."

Well, that was what the Christmases of long ago were like, my Christmases at least. When Christmas was what it used to be. But don't you agree with me that today's children, whose tired parents are even now embroiled in the household tasks that have replaced papering and putting down canvas, whose Christmas lists are far from complete and whose heads ache at the prospect of the baking that has to be done, don't you agree that today's children are as far removed from their parents' problems as we were long ago? And that for those same children, who have to grow up just as we did and face a future as uncertain as it can possibly be, this very Christmas of 1969 might well prove to be that unforgettable one, when for just a few brief moments all was right with the world?