

CHRISTMAS AT FOX VALLEY

December 20, 2004.

Loretta said something to me the other night that got me to thinking about Christmas at our home on the farm near Fox Valley. We were talking about the tradition of putting out stockings on Christmas Eve so that Santa Claus could leave presents for the children—of all ages. I of course, remembered that the practice of putting out stockings for Santa Claus was not part of our Christmas tradition at home. Then Loretta said, “Well, you know that our Mom never believed in a Santa Claus.” And, without ever having thought much about it before, I had to agree with her. Christmas was, foremost, a religious holiday in our home, and secondly, a highly social event within our family. We always got presents, but they were from Dad and Mom, or from Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty, or from a god-parent. Then Loretta and I remembered that the Santa Claus tradition was not part of our parents’ upbringing either. In fact, many homes of their generation were often visited by the Christkindl and the Belzenickl. Well-known G-R author Joseph Height wrote, “The Christkindl tradition, native to the ancestral homeland on the Rhine [River] since the middle of the seventeenth century, was most faithfully preserved in all the Catholic colonies [of South Russia], and indeed widely adopted by Lutheran communities.” While Christkindl was an angelic figure who represented goodness and the anticipation of receiving cookies and treats, the Belzenickl was a rogue character who reminded children of the dire consequences of bad behavior. The Belzenickl dressed as a fearsome and demonic figure would burst into the house dragging chains and brandishing a switch. He would seek out any children that were identified as having misbehaved during the year. These children might get a light switching or be dragged out of the house and thrown into a snowbank. But in the end, these children too were rewarded with a cookie or treat. Frank Bosch once told us that the Belzenickl scared “the beeegeezuz out of us and I really don’t why the old folks did that to us poor scared kids”, or something to that effect. (Read more about this tradition in Height’s book *Paradise on the Steppe*, page 186.) Eventually these two characters were blended into the modern Santa Claus personality.

So going back to my home, there was no Santa Claus, and little talk of a Santa Claus. He only entered Dad and Mom’s home when the grandchildren came along. Our spouses brought new traditions from their homes into our Weiss family. But as I grew up, the Christmas season always began with Advent. Advent, as part of the church liturgical calendar, was a time of quiet reflection and anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas was a celebration of this miraculous birth. And so it was observed in our Catholic home. As children, we were always excited about the arrival of Christmas much as children still are today. We would spend hours looking through the Eaton’s and Simpson Sears’ catalogues. We knew that we would receive a present from Dad and Mom. These were usually mail-ordered gifts that Dad would pick up at the Post Office during the day. By the time we came home from school, they would have been well hidden. I remember as a youngster snooping around the house trying to find the stash of candies or Christmas presents. Two Christmas presents come to mind as I write this. I remember receiving a metal service and gas station that came complete with gas pumps, cars and trucks, and even an elevator that carried vehicles to a roof-top parking area. I spent hours playing with this and I added other buildings and toy vehicles to make my

own little town. Another present that stands out was a green pen and pencil set that I received from Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty. I still have it. Many times we received clothing items as our Christmas gifts. Oh yes, I also remember getting my first Old Spice shaving lotion and cologne from Mom & Dad.

Besides the presents that children are always excited to receive, we looked forward to the special foods and the visiting of friends and relatives. Mom, of course, did lots of baking in preparation for the company we would receive over the Christmas season. There would be many of our favorite cookies and slices, but also buns filled with ham and bacon bits. There was also a variety of nuts and candies purchased for the Christmas season. We always had Christmas mandarin oranges, referred to then as “Jap oranges”, and often halvah. As kids we never did learn what halvah was made of -- we only knew it tasted good. Halvah is a rich confection made from ground sesame seeds and honey or syrup, often with dried fruits or nuts added. Halvah originates from the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean regions, and the Germans from Russia brought it with them to the New World. In Turkish, the name means “sweetmeat”. In the good years, Mom would buy an entire metal cake-pan of Halvah, and would have to hide it until Christmas. It was fairly costly but Mom knew that this was one of our favorite treats, and for me it still is.

We usually had a Christmas tree that Dad bought in town. (Where else would we be able to get one?!) I remember all of us helping Mom to decorate the tree. There would be other decorations around the house. And usually there would be the ubiquitous Christmas posters and drawings that we children had done as class assignments. The house was filled with the smells of baking. The house was given an extra cleaning. And the week leading up to Christmas was a special time to be with Dad and Mom in our home. There would be a few outside chores. Sometimes a vehicle or tractor would not start and this caused some extra work. But we spent a lot of time inside playing cards (Schmier), cribbage, checkers, “Chinese” checkers (where you moved marbles around a board), and more cards. Dad would try to teach us “Rookie” or Bridge, two of his favorite card games. Finally December 24 would arrive. We usually opened our Christmas presents from Mom and Dad on Christmas Eve before we went to church. Often it was something we could wear to church like a new sweater or shirt or jacket. We always dressed our best for this occasion. After Christmas Eve mass we would go to Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty’s place, or we would go back into town for lunch with them on Christmas Day. We always got a present from Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty. (I always got one from Aunt Ann as well.) Those were good times. There was always chicken noodle soup at Aunt Betty’s place, and lots to eat, including Velveeta Cheese, which Aunt Betty still keeps in her fridge today. The adults would have a drink or two, rarely more, and it was always a loud and happy houseful when we were together. In later years, Ron and Marie and their growing family would be there too. We were close to Ron and Marie in those years and we saw them often. One of the most popular Christmas gifts ever came from Ron, the year he was taking a welding (?) course in Moose Jaw. He brought home the first table-hockey game we had ever seen, with changeable players. We had all SIX NHL hockey teams. On this table, the players only swung in a circle; they did not move up and down the ice, and they shot a marble instead of a puck. We

spent hours on it, and had fits of laughter when we watched Aunt Betty shrieking and trying to stop the marble from rolling into the net she was defending.

Then in later years, on December 24, we waited at home on the farm for Ken to come home for Christmas. We took turns walking to the north bedroom to check for lights coming from the east. We all wanted to be first to yell, "Here he comes; you can tell by how fast the lights are moving!" I remember one Christmas when Dad was in the hospital at Leader, and the house was pretty quiet on Christmas Eve. And then Ken arrived and everything seemed to brighten up and it began to feel like Christmas. Ken brought Mom an electric kettle I think, or an appliance of some kind. She was really pleased with it. We went to Christmas Eve mass, and then visited Dad on Christmas Day. The years passed and slowly each of us left home, and I remember how anxious and excited I always was to get "home" for Christmas Eve, even after "home" moved to Medicine Hat. Of course then it was not only to see Dad and Mom again, but to be with brothers and sister and spouses. Those were good times too.

We always managed as well, to visit the Wetsch and Dirk families in the Schuler area at some time during the Christmas season. These were always happy occasions with a houseful of people, eating, drinking, and playing cards. Or they would visit at Fox Valley, especially on December 28 which was Uncle Frank's birthday, and there was usually a big birthday party at his place. Sometimes we went to Uncle Kaspar and Aunt RoseMarie's place on January 6. This was the Church holiday known as Epiphany or Driekönigstag. January 6 is also referred to as the Twelfth night of Christmas and officially ends the Christmas season. Dreikönig means "Three Kings", and January 6 is a celebration to commemorate the three wise men who followed the Star of Bethlehem to bring gifts to the Christ Child. Because one of these Three Kings was named "Caspar", there was often a party at the Wetsch farm on January 6. (The other two kings were Melchior and Balthasar.) We always looked forward with great excitement to all the socializing that would take place over the Christmas season.

The Christmas social season sometimes started on December 6, the feast of St. Nicholas. We would then go to a party at Uncle Nick Schafer's farm. This too was a happy home, and we always enjoyed a visit there.

So Santa Claus, even though I grew up without having you around, you are nevertheless welcome in my home. Even the Belzenickl would be welcome if it means that our family will be together for the Christmas season. (Of course I can say that now -- the Belzenickl only tormented the younger children!) Christmas is a special time of year. Yes our society creates a lot of "hype" in advance of December 25, but it is the week before Christmas that I really feel the stirring of the Christmas spirit within me. And that is when I begin to notice the same spirit radiating from all those around me. On Christmas Eve, I will be with Patti and with Erin and Melanie and with Aaron and Lance. But you can bet that I will also be thinking of Dad and Mom, and of Ken and Loretta and Rem, and their families. I cannot "feel" Christmas without thinking of them.