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12 Memories of Christmas

[E-mail](#)TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2009 12:56 LISA JENSEN [COLUMNS - OPINION](#)

It was a damp, frigid, twilit afternoon in Wilmette, Illinois, where we were spending Thanksgiving with Art Boy's 91-year-old mom, Helen. Art Boy and I were out walking with his brother, David, when we ducked into the Wilmette Historical Society Museum to dodge a passing rainshower. The curator was about to close up for the evening, but he was thrilled to meet members of a family who'd lived in town for generations, fishing hopefully for any stray family artifacts that might be lying around.

Helen is planning to downsize soon to a smaller house, so we spent a few days going through old family photos and papers, earmarking those to be donated to the historical museum. It turned out to be the perfect way to spend the week of Thanksgiving, revisiting family

history, connecting the dots between where we all came from and where we are now.

I find this reflective mode more suitable to the spirit of the Yuletide season than the frenzy of buying, eating, and dashing through the snow to the next event. For the benefit of future historians, I submit my 12 Memories of Christmas, random moments from my own childhood celebrations that have stuck with me over the years. If any of these jog your own memories, share them with your loved ones this holiday season.

OK, make your doorstep jokes, but as a teenager, I learned to bake fruitcake from a disintegrating recipe my Aunt Chris once clipped out of a magazine. I'd bake one during Thanksgiving weekend, wrap it in a dishtowel, and baste it frequently with Manischewicz grape wine for a month until it was ripe enough to eat.

Glad Tidings In those pre-Netflix days, we waited all year for the TV Christmas specials that ushered in the season. The first TV ads for "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," or "A Charlie Brown Christmas" were early harbingers of the holidays. Even the ad for Norelco's "Floating Heads" electric shaver, with tiny Santas sledding over the snow on rotary heads, sent us into a frenzy of anticipation.

More Glad Tidings When my dad started singing a jaunty version of his favorite holiday song, "Christmas is a-comin' and the goose is getting fat..." we knew the season was officially underway.

Glass Wax Modern science has yet to determine what this substance actually was. But my brothers and I

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gleefully dipped our sponges into it to stencil holiday images like stars, snowflakes, and Santas onto every window in the house we could reach. They had to be chiseled off with a razor blade, which explains why the Jensens' windows were often still decorated with holly and snowmen in March.

Fruitcake OK, make your doorstep jokes, but as a teenager, I learned to bake fruitcake from a disintegrating recipe my Aunt Chris once clipped out of a magazine. I'd bake one during Thanksgiving weekend, wrap it in a dishtowel, and baste it frequently with Manischewicz grape wine for a month until it was ripe enough to eat. It wasn't an heirloom family recipe, but my dad and my brother, Mike, loved it so much, I made it every year.

Deck the Halls Daddy and I were in cahoots on this one. Every year, he hung a lush evergreen branch from the knotty pine beam in our living room ceiling, then I scaled the rickety ladder to decorate it, while he lay in his recliner, helpfully pointing out "holes" to be filled.

Shopping Daze One year, my brothers marched me off to Del Amo Mall in Torrance, Calif. (one of the first enclosed shopping malls in the country) to buy Christmas presents for our folks. I don't remember what we bought, but I do recall how grown-up I felt when we had lunch afterwards at the Ontra Cafeteria all by ourselves.

First Noels Christmas music was a huge part of our holiday festivities. My favorite carol was (and remains) "Villancicos," a navideños sung in Spanish and English to a sinuous salsa beat on a vintage vinyl album by the Harry Simeone Chorale. If anyone knows anything about this carol (I've never heard it anywhere else), I'd love to know.

Nutcracker Sweets My mom's Christmas cookies were legendary. Some of my happiest memories are of sitting at the kitchen table with my brother, Steve, applying colored frosting, and sugar beads to stacks of Mom's pièce-de-résistance, Grandma Bader's decadent sour cream cut-out sugar cookies.

Handel With Care In the '60s, my parents installed an intercom system with a speaker in every room, connected to a central record turntable. (Google it, kids.) For years thereafter, Mom would blast her boxed set of Handel's "Messiah" throughout the house on Christmas Eve as we all feverishly finished up last-minute gift-wrapping in our respective lairs. To this day, the "Hallelujah Chorus" sounds incomplete to me if not accompanied by the hiss of a scissor blade on ribbed curling ribbon.

Stocking Stuff We always found stockings crammed with reading material on our beds first thing Christmas morning, a largely futile attempt by our parents to keep us distracted and quiet for a few more nanoseconds before the revelry began. I always got a Woody Woodpecker comic book; Steve, an Uncle Scrooge. And every year, there was a tangerine and a roll of quarters at the bottom of each sock.

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How Troll When I was 10, I found my first troll doll peeking out of my stocking on Christmas morning. He was such an early model, he didn't even have the wild neon hair, just a modest curly white Afro, with the name of the original Danish manufacturer, "Dam," engraved on the sole of one foot. "Another Dam thing from Denmark," laughed my dad, whose Danish family had emigrated to the states just a couple of years before he was born.

Dash Away All Every Christmas morning, we kids lined up in the hall—me (the baby) first, Steve in the middle, then Mike—for a few extra minutes of exquisite, unbearable anticipation before the door was thrown open into the room where the tree was waiting. For some reason, this is my most compelling Christmas memory, not the mad dash to the presents, but those companionable moments of waiting together on the brink.

Children grow up and fly away, but cherished Christmas memories last forever. Make some good ones this year.

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