

## Spending Time Together is an Important Part of Christmas

I have been interested in family history for decades and cannot get enough information about my family and what their lives were like as they grew up. I feel that it is important to share with future generations what our lives were like so they may have a better appreciation of those who came before them. We can't even imagine how much different life will be in two or three generations. Most of us grew up with electricity and indoor plumbing unlike our grandparents - and maybe even our parents. Grandchildren now can't imagine what our lives were like without cell phone and the internet. I'm going to focus today on what Christmas was like for me as a child.

My parents raised five children with a span of 17 years from the oldest to the youngest on an 80-acre dairy and hog farm southwest of Monroe. As one can imagine, there was not much extra money for Christmas presents. We would always get one bigger toy and the rest of our presents would be clothing and maybe some smaller, fun items. When we four boys would come down from upstairs into the dining room there might be a bowl of oranges, a bowl of English walnuts, Brazil nuts, almonds, and hazelnuts (that we needed to use a metal nutcracker to open), and a bowl with some brightly colored ribbon candy and other hard candies on the table. I never wondered how Santa knew where the bowls and the nutcracker were stored to be able to put them out for us!

The Christmas tree was in the living room around the corner from the stairway. My father did not believe in spending more than a dollar on our tree, so they got more "Charlie Brownish" as the years went by. Santa did not wrap any of our presents, nor did he put any tags on the gifts. Since there was three and a half years between the closest of these children, it was usually easy to figure out who received what gift. Those who were closet in age might even get identical gifts. Of course, we had to get out and milk cows, feed the animals, and do the rest of the chores before we could come back in and play with what we had received. If we were fortunate, there wouldn't be any new snow that also had to be moved before we could go back in.

After the morning chores were done, we would have some time to play and watch television before eating. Mom would have been fixing a great noontime meal for us, which would be composed of ham, mashed potatoes, gravy, her homemade pear bread, and a variety of decorated cookies and more. In the afternoon we might play a new board game as a family or revert to a game of monopoly. We also might have spent some of the time outside sledding or playing in the snow. Of course, we also had the evening chores to do after supper.

My parents were the youngest in their families, so I don't remember ever spending Christmas with any extended family. My maternal grandmother's last Christmas was when I was seven. They lived in Browntown, which is where we went to church. So as a young child, we would go there on Christmas Eve before and after church; I have no memory of that. I do remember that my maternal grandfather gave each of his grandsons a John Deere tractor, but that may not have been at Christmas. I treasured that tractor into my adult life, even if it wasn't in very good shape due to extreme use. I know that my paternal grandfather would give Dad some money before Christmas that Dad would take to the toy department at Bauman Ace Hardware on the south side of the square on Christmas Eve to buy gifts for Santa to deliver. I'm sure that Dad would also take food to his parents in Monroe for Christmas. He might also add in a package or two of Red Man for Granddad.

The Christmas program at the one-room school was also a major part of the Christmas season for us. The teacher had to find small poems for the younger students to recite and a play or two for the older children to perform and then decide which student would be able to memorize and perform each of the



This photo of the Figi Christmas was taken in 1969 at the Figi's second Christmas celebration that year; they had celebrated in November before Matt left for Vietnam. Shown in front of the Charlie Brown Christmas tree is Matt's little sister, Alice.

parts. Of course, every student in the school had to be part of the program. There were practices for weeks before the program and then we had to get the building ready for performance evening. That meant hanging a curtain across the school to separate the “stage” from the audience. We also had to carry the benches in from the woodshed for the parents and older siblings to sit on.

That evening was an exciting time as the neighbors finished their chores early to get to the school. Santa would show up after the performances, bringing each child a small paper bag with some candy and maybe an apple or orange in it. There are so many great memories of family and friends from those wonderful days.

My memories are nothing special to anyone other than me. I am hoping that some of you may use the extra time that many of us have because of the pandemic to record your memories of not just Christmas, but of life to share with future generations. I want to wish each of you a very merry Christmas and the best in 2021. I’m hoping that it won’t be many more months before we can resume a more normal life. Because of the way the holidays fall, there won’t be a Saturday paper again until January 9.