



**MEMBERS  
REMEMBER  
DECEMBER**

**A Multi-cultural  
Portrait of Christmas  
and Hanukkah**

**As seen through the  
eyes of a Child**



## **My First Memory of Christmas: Austria, December 1945** **by Angela Graham Ricketts**

World War II had just ended but the fear and hunger were still there. I was four years old and going to bed hungry was normal. On Christmas Eve we fasted so that we could attend midnight Mass and have communion. After Mass, we celebrated the arrival of Christmas with a selection of cold meats (many of them homemade) like kobasa and Christmas sweets. I still remember the feeling of wonder when I woke up Christmas morning and saw a small fir tree decorated with tiny white candles, all lit up, and my parents saying it was a sign that the Christ Child had come to save us.



## **Christmas in French Canada by Pat McCarthy**

Being of French Acadian descent, Christmas in Quebec was very family oriented. The days leading up to Christmas were filled with wonderful baking smells. Grandparents would arrive from New Brunswick. On Christmas Eve, we all went to Midnight Mass (yes, it was at midnight). After Mass, we would come home to the “Reveillon”. We then had our Christmas feast. Top of the list was “tourtiere”, a wonderful meat pie. All the baking that was done was brought out, especially the “Buche de Noel”, a log shaped cake. When we were finished eating, we would gather around the Christmas tree and open presents. Yes, it was around 2 am! Our stockings hanging by the chimney were not filled until we were in bed. And yes, there was always an orange in the stocking, a real treat!



## **My First Memories as a Kid in Hong Kong by Wilkie Lau**

When I was growing up in Hong Kong, it was still under British rule. I feel very fortunate that I got to appreciate the major festivals in both the Chinese and Western cultures, Christmas being one of them. Like the majority of the Chinese population, my parents were more into celebrating Chinese New Year than Christmas, so as a kid I didn't pay much attention to what Christmas was about. However, one day my dad asked me what I would want as a gift if I could have anything I wanted. I told him I would like a toy gun, just like the cowboys have in the movies. I didn't take note of why he asked or what time

of year it was. I just remembered that one morning I touched something strange by my feet when I woke up in the morning. I looked down and found a toy gun in a holster on a belt. I was overjoyed. I proudly wore it all day around my waist. I must have looked like Woody in Toy Story. That turned out to be Christmas Day. From that point on, Christmas took on a much higher significance in my young life. Since that time, every winter, I looked forward to seeing the major department stores' windows put on the Christmas displays and the business district put on the Christmas decorations. And of course, Santa!



## **Christmas in Mauritius, Indian Ocean by John and Mirielle Lan**

Christmas is a major festival in Mauritius, celebrated by Christians but also by many non-Christians. Children get overly excited and are waiting eagerly to welcome "Papa Noel." A "Filao" tree (a tropical pine tree) is our Christmas tree and it will be decorated with multicolored balloons. Some families would also display a Nativity scene on a table beside the Filao.

On Christmas Eve, the children are suddenly well-behaved, and they would clean and polish their shoes until they are shiny. The shinier they are, the better the expected gifts. These shoes are strategically placed under the bed, and Papa Noel usually knows where to look for them. Around 11:00pm, a large number of the population would proceed on foot to a local outdoor shrine, "Marie Reine de la Paix", situated on a hill overlooking the city of Port Louis, for a festive midnight Mass with lots of singing, under the tropical sky full of stars. Unlike the season in Canada, Christmas happens during the peak of summer in Mauritius.

On Christmas Day, the children are up early to check on their gifts and play with their toys endlessly. Adults get busy preparing a dinner feast which usually includes various tasty appetizers, chicken, rice, potatoes, peas, salads and delicious pastries which will be shared with the extended family. Turkey is nowhere to be found. Some families may go to the grandparents' house for a big family celebration while others may opt to spend the day at a hot beach for a family potluck picnic, music and dancing the local dance, "Sega."

At the end of the day, everyone is tired but happy to have celebrated Christmas with their loved ones.



## **Christmas in Holland in the early 40's by Dina Rintjema**

I was born in 1936 so the war was on. Christmas was just like any other day. We were hungry. There was a tree with real candles on but no other decorations. The candles were in candle-holders and clipped on to the branches. There were no presents under the tree. We would sometimes get a chocolate bar. In those days, you couldn't buy anything. There was no white flour so white bread was made from ground-up tulip bulbs (tasted terrible!) My parents couldn't buy anything because there was nothing to buy. You couldn't get bananas or oranges. I had never seen a banana until I came to Canada.

St. Nicholas came on December 5<sup>th</sup> but there were no presents. We might get a candy or an apple. We put out wooden shoes outside the door and in the morning, when we got up, there might be an apple or a pair of socks.

In school Black Peter came with Santa Claus. If anybody was bad, he was put into Black Peter's sack. Santa gave all the children red oranges (blood oranges) but that was it.



## **Ukrainian Christmas in Canada**

My most memorable Ukrainian Christmas was when I was very young and in grade school. A good friend of our family had fallen on hard times and their family of six (the parents plus four young children) were unlikely to have a proper Christmas or even a Christmas dinner. They would give you the shirt off their backs if they could. My parents decided to invite them to Christmas dinner. My mother cooked a Christmas dinner for 12 consisting of buckwheat and honey (as an opening dish), perogies, cabbage rolls, mashed potatoes, venison and of course, a turkey with all the trimmings. Needless to say, the dinner was a huge success and the family was over the top with joy. Once the dinner was over and our friends were ready to depart, my parents had packed up all of the leftovers (of which there were plenty) and gave it to the family to take home to enjoy, together with four Christmas stockings stuffed with goodies for the children. Even at my—and my siblings'—young age, it was a very satisfying day to see the smile on the

parents and their children's faces when they left. Needless to say, their family was overjoyed at having a proper Christmas dinner and our family felt that the true spirit of Christmas and goodwill to others was still present.



## **A Tamil Christmas Celebration in Sri Lanka by Tresa Anthonimuthu**



Thinking back to my childhood days, I always feel warm inside when reminiscing about Christmas time in Sri Lanka. I am reminded of the delicious rice pudding, special cake and traditional sweets my mom would make for my siblings and I. On Christmas Eve, my parents would give us new clothes to wear and at 11PM we are excited to go to Christmas Eve midnight Mass to adore the infant baby Jesus. The Mass is always filled with the harmonies of Christmas carols and beautiful lights to symbolize the joyous time. After Mass, my siblings and I are excited to see Christmas Papa outside the church, giving candies and singing Christmas carols. It is always a joyous time to sing and dance with all the villagers. The excitement doesn't end here as on Christmas Day we spend our day travelling to my uncle's house where my siblings and I are given presents and money. This is a very special memory that is near and dear to my heart.



## **A German-Canadian Christmas in the early 40's by Josie Schwarzli**

Well do I remember how as a child the excitement of Christmas grew to a feverish pitch as December 24<sup>th</sup> approached. Born to European immigrants from Germany and Austro-Hungary (Slovakia) my siblings and I were well aware of the significance of the Christ Child (Kristkindl) as well as Santa Claus who would arrive on Christmas Eve, the highlight for us.

The preferred fir tree, freshly cut, was brought into our tiny 4-bedroom bungalow north of Toronto a week before the anticipated night. Mother had been busy baking festival cookies and treats which we now helped hang on the tree. Soon the tree glowed with hand-wrapped candies with frayed tissue edges, streamers and a few ornaments. It was complete when the Bethlehem stable with all the figures was placed under the tree. The tiny crib was left empty. After admiring the result, the two doors to the living room were locked to await the holy night. For the rest of the week, as anticipation grew, we four were often on our hands and knees, sniffing at the bottom of the door to inhale the aroma of the fresh fir needles and the excitement it would entail.

Christmas Eve was a meatless meal which we children gobbled down in a rush to get cleaned up with a bath and one's hair in fine order, and then relegated to the bedroom with Mother and the door closed behind. There we peered into the dark sky, hoping to catch a glimpse of Santa and his reindeer. One year, my young brother's imagination was so vivid he insisted he saw Santa flying by. Dad's job was to meet Santa at the door. We could hear the stomping of feet, mumbling voices, a shuffling sound, doors opening and closing and finally the loud goodbye from Dad. Then the four of us lined up, each carrying a lit candle and my sister, the youngest with the figurine of the baby Jesus (Kristkindl) filed into the living room. There we knelt close to the crib in which my sister placed the baby. We said some prayers of thanksgiving, sang Silent Night followed by Jingle Bells, all the while scanning the wrapped parcels which would be opened that night. Many of our gifts were homemade by my carpenter father. Although there would be more food treats in the early evening, playing with our new toys took top priority. The following day, on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the family would dress in our best and go to church. Our simple, but joyous Christmas was a mixture of European and Canadian traditions.



## **Christmas in South Africa by Kathleen Peel**

With South Africa being in the southern hemisphere, Christmas falls in the summer months. Traditionally we experience temperatures between 25 and 35 degrees Celsius. Families would always decorate 12 days before Christmas and then take down the decorations 12 days after. We very seldom decorated outside, perhaps just a few ornaments or colorful garland in a tree.

I don't recall ever walking through a shopping mall seeing big Christmas decorations or stores decorated with Christmas themes. The first time I saw a mall Santa was when we immigrated to Canada.

Because of the weather, most businesses closed down from December 5<sup>th</sup> to January 5<sup>th</sup>. We would always celebrate that time visiting friends and family, enjoying outdoor barbeques and maybe a throw-together Christmas party at someone's house.

Christmas Day started with the kids opening presents under the tree and rushing to see what Santa had left in their pillow cases which were hung on a makeshift fireplace or on a stairwell banister. Most of the day was spent with friends or families enjoying the weather at someone's poolside. An early dinner consisted of turkey or lamb along with all the trimmings. I must mention that we always had roast potatoes, not mashed, with our turkey dinners.

In my later years, our family would go away for Christmas to an oceanfront destination. The hotels would host big Christmas Eve dances and buffet lunches on Christmas Day, followed by celebratory Boxing Day brunch.



## **Polish Christmas by Gladys Cybruch**

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are very important religious holidays in Poland. In Poland, Catholics do not eat meat on Christmas Eve (Wigilia in Polish). The Christmas Eve dinner is always the same. Before dinner, "Oplatek" (the Host) is passed around. Oplatek is similar to the Communion Host. Everyone gets a piece of Oplatek and they greet each other by breaking off a piece of the other person's Oplatek and wishing them the best for the coming year. Then the meal is served. They start with pickled herring, pierogi with sour cream, mushroom soup, and a fish dish with potatoes and sauerkraut. An assortment of Polish desserts follows including "makownik" (a rolled poppyseed cake). This is usually followed by attending Midnight Mass. In Poland, "Swiety Mikoja" (Saint Nicholas) brings gifts to children on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Merry Christmas in Polish is "Wesolych Swiat."



## **My Montreal Christmas by Peter Rudner**

Where to start? Perhaps I should start at the end—a room full of happy Jews sitting at a long knotty-pine trestle table gorging on turkey and passing the cranberry sauce. For those of us who are Jewish, or of mixed parentage like me, Christmas was time for

innovation. My mom was Catholic and my dad Jewish, and Christmas presented its own set of dilemmas to work around. It was generally accepted within the walls of my house that I was Jewish and although I had never had a bar mitzvah, I attended the high holidays with my dad and uncle at the Spanish Portuguese synagogue in Montreal—although our family was neither. I identified as Jewish.

My mom, on the other hand, grew up Catholic, went to high school in a convent boarding school in New Brunswick. She did not attend church regularly that I could see, but I do remember her lighting candles at the front of a church on occasion. I guess she was mostly secular by then and so was my Dad, and despite the taboos of the late 1930s and 40's, they found each other. I was their new tradition—one that carries on in my own family—and my status of sorta Jewish was their bargain.

So, we as a family were invited to my Dad's family's special celebrations such as Passover, their weddings and occasionally attended their funerals. In November or December, my Dad would give me some Hanukkah gelt (chocolate coins wrapped in gold coloured foil) plus a dreidel (a small, four-sided top with Hebrew letters inscribed on it). Then at Christmas, we would put up a tree in the living room, wrap presents, play Christmas music and in general enjoy the season. That was my mom and dad's time to return the year's hospitality from my dad's side and to invite them all for Christmas dinner.

This was no small thing.

I say this because Christmas, for Jews, can be a time of social angst. Just to set the record straight, Hanukkah is not "Jewish Christmas." It is a festive minor religious event in the Hebrew calendar that celebrates the miracle of the oil when the Temple in Jerusalem was sacked. Most of the oil intended for the temple's ceremonial candles—which must be lit every night—had been spilt or tainted. The liberators had enough left for only one night, but when the candles were re-lit with the remaining oil, the flame flickered on for 8 days until more could be found.

The miracle is remembered with games of chance, treats similar to jelly donuts, potato pancakes, and a lighting of candles each evening in a 9-candle candelabra similar to a menorah. So while Hanukkah is really nice, it sort of pales in comparison to Christmas, the weeks of build-up, Santa, and midnight Mass. It is not a high holiday. The streets and stores are not festooned with decorations and there is no parade. So all that good will and bonhomie, however nice, can unintentionally leave you feeling left out. On the outside looking in. Melancholy.

It makes it worse when all the other kids are getting these great presents and December 25<sup>th</sup> is, well, just another day. A lot of Jewish families decided to take a vacation at that time to give the family something to look forward to. Also, they did it so the kids would

have something to talk about when they went back to school. I will not make a detailed list of the seasonal self-medicating that I have seen but as I said, it was occasion for social angst.

That is except for my family.

My mom was their license to shop in Montreal's decorated stores, to buy fancy wrapping paper and put their gifts under a real Christmas tree with decorations and lights. Then to have a giant turkey with stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce, and loads of Christmas fare—and to contribute cakes, pies and maraschino chocolates to the Christmas cookies on my mom's dessert table.

It was a sweet permission giving. There we all were around the table. No angst. Just a good Christmas nosh. Twenty-two Jews including my cousins and one Catholic mom from New Brunswick, all gorging on turkey and passing the cranberry sauce. Who is to say we had not been blessed with Peace on Earth?



## **Christmas in Hungary in the 30's by George Hirsch**

There were no artificial trees or electric tree lights. No Santa Claus. St. Nicholas was celebrated December 6 or 7. The parents purchased a tree a couple of days before and hid it somewhere. On Christmas Eve, we had a light lunch and were sent to our bedroom to have a nap. The parents got busy, erected and decorated the tree. Around 6pm, everything was quiet. We had supper which was fish, potatoes and sweets. When we were finished, one parent sneaked into a closed room where the Christmas tree was and rang a little bell. That was the notice that the angels had finished decorating the tree and left. We were allowed in. The sight was magnificent! There stood the tree with real candles lit; little sparkle rods were also lit. There was "angyelhaj" (angel hair), which was a very fine lace, fancy wrapped little candies and under the tree, all the presents unwrapped. We were singing some Christmas Noels and then were allowed to play with the new toys. It was customary to go to Midnight Mass but not small children. We attended Mass Christmas day. Hungary was and probably is 60% Roman Catholic.

The next day we had a lovely dinner, generally roast pork at Grandmother's. The Christmas tree was taken down January 7 on Three Wisemen's day.



## **Christmas in India by Hyacinth de Souza**

Christmas has always been a time of great anticipation and I have very fond memories of my childhood Christmases. Those were days when we had less material gifts but hearts full of love. In Bombay, India, the focus was on friends and relations.

We definitely had a new dress and a pair of shoes which would see us through many Sundays. Houses would be cleaned and, if need be, whitewashed too. We children were given the task of making the crib and decorating an artificial Christmas tree. We had never seen snow so we would cover the branches with cotton wool spread thin. After seeing the actual pine covered with snow, I have never decorated a tree again with imaginary snow.

Ten days before Christmas, Mum would gather us around and start making the Christmas sweets, consisting of plum cake and coconut cakes. Jujubes, marshmallows, marzipan, chocolate fudge, date rolls and other fried stuff which has a coconut or dry fruit filling. We had to book a time at the bakery as we did not have ovens at home. So, the night before, my parents would take all the cakes and our baker would deliver them next morning when he delivered the bread for the day.

Mum would fill boxes with sweets and, as soon as we returned from church, my sister and I would take these boxes to the 15 neighbors who would give us plenty of hugs and admire our clothes. Our neighbors were all Hindus: they reciprocated at Diwali. During the week, they would visit to pay homage at our crib and particularly bring the young to see the crib too. My father was a great believer in family, so he would hire a taxi and take the family to visit his two aunts and an uncle and Mum's only aunt in Bombay, with a box of sweets before we returned for a late lunch. My dad also had two priest brothers who were involved in their own parish on Christmas Day. So they would join us for a meal on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, which happened to be my parents' wedding anniversary.



## **Christmas in England by Anna Bartell**

This was a 60's Christmas in England. Leading up to Christmas, my father would decorate the family room and kitchen with crepe paper decorations and balloons on which he would draw caricatures of family members. My father would make three trifles in huge salad bowls and the Christmas cake. We would all decorate the Christmas tree and the "piece de resistance" was real chocolate ornaments. Every day we would ask is it time for us to eat one tonight? On Christmas Eve the turkey would go into the oven and us children would have a bath and be sent to bed (in lovely new pyjamas). Of course, we would try to stay awake and see Santa. I would be woken at First Light by one of my brothers or one of my four sisters and we would collect our pillow cases from the bottom of our beds and then all climb onto one bed and open and eat everything that was in there. As soon as mom or dad stirred, we were allowed to go downstairs together and open the gifts under the tree. Then there was calm and quiet as we always watched the Queen's message.

Around noon both Nanas would arrive, accompanied by my uncles Bill and Stanley then all eleven of us would sit down around the dinner table. We pulled crackers, wearing the funny hats and reading the jokes that were inside. Around 6:00 more aunts and uncles would arrive, cousins in tow. The house would be packed full of people and the neighbors came around too. We played games like charades, there was singing and dancing and this went on till the wee hours of the morning. Boxing Day was much the same, as some of the relatives would have stayed overnight but my favorite thing was that I could have trifle for breakfast. Now finally we could eat the chocolate ornaments off the tree but, you know, we'd eaten so much chocolate over the last few days that nobody really wanted them anymore!



## **Christmas in Italy by Maria Pacelli Segreti**

I come from the Campania region which is a few hours south of Rome, close to Naples. As a little girl who lived on a farm, we led a very basic life. Christmas was an exciting time when families got together to celebrate the birth of Jesus. My little town of Puglianello only had about 300-400 inhabitants, mainly farmers. I remember going to church on Christmas Eve in the town and my aunt owned a small variety store and she would always give me little treats.

We did not know anything about Santa Claus. There were never any presents. It was all about family and friends and lots of food. There were no decorations that I remember,

not even a Christmas tree, but there was always a 'presepio', a Nativity set by the fireplace. It includes baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph plus the shepherds and three wise men.

On Christmas Eve we would hang a sock by the fireplace and hope that "Babbo Natale" (Father Christmas) would bring us sweets. This usually happened on January 6<sup>th</sup>; however, that was when the Befana would come. She was the ugly woman who would come and fill the sock with candies to the good kids and the naughty ones would get a lump of coal. It was always exciting to see if you were good or not. I don't remember ever getting coal (LOL). It was during this time that we ate the famous "Panettone" (Christmas cake).

There is an old Italian saying that if you purchased something very cheap, it would only last from Christmas Day (December 25) to Santo Stefano (Boxing Day).

In Naples there is a famous street, "Via San Gregorio". It is the famous street of nativity scenes. It's located in the old historic city centre and it's full of little shops where you can purchase everything Christmas related. It's amazing!

We always ate fish on Christmas Eve and one of the famous dishes that was always served on this night was cod fish soup which included cod fish, cauliflower and leek. Even when we moved to Canada, this tradition continued.

The other tradition that was always followed was the frying of "Zeppole": this is basically fried dough.

I recall my mom preparing a large meal which included meat and "Capone" which is a large chicken. We did not have turkey.

When we moved to Canada, we quickly adapted to the Western way, but still kept our traditional ways.



## **Chanukah in Canada by April Katz-Holman**

Chanukah was one of the most enjoyable of Jewish holidays. As children, we celebrated by lighting the candles on the Menorah. We were given gifts every one of the 8 days. We enjoyed the spinning of the dreidel. It was one of those things that brought out the joy of family living. The food was wonderful, especially the potato latkes. Oh, and I must mention the Chanukah gelt (money) which was hidden and we had to find it.

Our late father thought if the Christians had lights, why not us? He had someone build a huge lighted Menorah and I think also a Star of David.



## **Christmas in British Guyana by Monica van Maris**

I was born in British Guyana in 1935 and lived there until I came to Canada when I was 19 years old. Christmas in Guyana is very religious. Eight days before Christmas, we were expected to go to church first thing in the morning. If we miss a Mass, we have to have a good excuse for the nuns at school

Christmas to us in Guyana had to do with food. We would go to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve and when we came home around 1am, we would have garlic pork and bread. We usually slept in Christmas morning. You would be lucky in the morning if there was a package for you. Usually it was shoes or a skirt. We never received toys. We never had snow. Since it is the rainy season, we were almost guaranteed we would have rain on Christmas. Food was scarce. Mom would often give a chicken to the neighbors for their celebrations.

The good thing is nobody works on Christmas Day and your neighbors come over for garlic pork. We all sit around and listen to the radio. For dinner, we usually sacrificed one of our turkeys. We had a big dinner: turkey, rice and sweet potatoes. For dessert, we had Christmas cake which my father made. It is made up of dried fruits and soaked in rum. As kids, we either listened to the radio or played card games. In the evening, after our meal, we would go back to church. And that was it. After Christmas Day, we start school 2 days later.

When I was really young, it was wartime. We had a lot of soldiers walking around on holidays. We always had soldiers at our house. When the war finished, I remember the bells tolling when I was in class. The War Department officers came to every house and if you were over 18, you had to go. I had three uncles in the war but only one came home.



## **Christmas in Scotland by Eleanor Rudner**

Christmas as a child in Scotland was magical for me. I worried about Santa coming down our chimney and maybe getting stuck as he had to climb down three stories. Also his lovely red coat would get dirty. We lived in a one-room tenement flat in the city of Glasgow.

My mother made sure that our stockings were hanging up properly and we called up the chimney with our requests. My two sisters, my brother and I were never disappointed in the morning, as Santa seemed to know *exactly* what we wanted. We were always delighted with the book he would bring and the toy or game, plus some candies or sweeties. My mother always made a special Christmas plum pudding. It was delicious!

When we were older, we might get an orange at the bottom of the stocking also. We would go to morning Mass then later we would get ready to walk two miles to Grandma's house, or take a tramway car. The Second World War was on so at Grandma's we had to keep all windows dark at night, even at Christmas, in case airplanes would fly overhead and see a light. In her sitting room, my father, who was a band leader, would sit down at the piano and we would all sing Christmas carols. With my father playing and us all singing, it was always a wonderful time.

Eventually, when we moved from the tenement to a lovely house in the west end with a real front, back and side garden, we decided to reverse the role by making our mum and dad a stocking each. I still remember what great surprise they had when we woke them up on Xmas day and presented them with a stocking each. They were both thrilled!



## **Christmas in Germany during the Depression Era by Gert Brugger**

The Christmas blessing in Germany was "weihe nacht", Blessed Night. In a child's mind, it was a special day. Growing up in a family of 7 during the Depression era, Christmas and birthdays were the only days remembered. Weihe Nacht was a big day for us to receive anything. I got a new coat one winter which was a big thing because my mother had made it. At the time, we were too small to go to Midnight Mass: that came later. Christmas morning at 8 o'clock we went to church and by that time, everything was kind of mysterious: we knew something was going to happen.

Then after church, we were allowed to go into the living room. There was the Christmas tree with colourful real wax candles. My dad lit the candles. We hadn't been allowed into the living room before that. Sure enough, there was the tree with little things underneath. There were Christmas balls on the tree and tinsel (lemetta) foil strings. On the tip of the tree was a little angel about 6" tall. Before Christmas, we had to learn a poem and on Christmas Day we had to recite it and make a little genuflection. We sang beautiful songs like Little Town of Bethlehem, Silent Night (Stille Nacht) and Sweeter the Bells Never Ring.

The gifts came from Krist Kindl although I knew my mom had made the coat because I had to try it on. I believed until I was 10 years old and my 2 big brothers told me that our parents had bought gifts and hidden them from us.

There was the stable with Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the donkeys: that's among the few things I brought to Canada. The figures were made of papier mache, the stable was made of wood. The little Jesus was made of wax, about an inch and a half big. My son almost bit the head off one year! The stable is still in use today.



After we came home from church, there were all the Christmas baked goodies my mom had made. We got all kinds of gingerbread cookies and "lebkuchen". Our gifts included Spanish blood oranges on special colourful paper plates, as well as walnuts and hazelnuts and candies. Our parents couldn't afford to buy them during the year. One year I got a doll.

The joy that the little Christ Child was born was the main thing. We didn't have radios or big store windows or Santas sitting on the corner. It was a time of innocence: you believed and that was it. We got some gifts, as much as my parents could afford.

St. Nicholas' feast day is December 6. On that day, we always put out cookies for St. Nicholas and the donkey. St. Nicholas also had a sidekick, Black Peter ("struble peter"). He had a book and everything you did during the year was written in it, a naughty and nice list.

The day after Christmas was also a holiday when we went visiting. There was much more visiting among neighbors then. We played outside together. When the lanterns came on outside, we had to come in from the playground. I had to help in the kitchen and the boys had to polish shoes. You never went to church without polished shoes.



## **Christmas in Stouffville in the Early 1960's by Jill and Kevin McWhinnie**

Our family moved to Stouffville in 1956. Our house was one of 12 new bungalows that had been built on the Timbers farm at the west end of town and for several winters the house was still surrounded by farmland.

On winter nights the winds would sweep the snow across the fields, leaving drifts as high as the eaves troughs. Jack Frost would ride on the freezing wind, leaving beautiful, intricate patterns of frost on the bay windows of the living room.

One night the wicked winter wind carried away the blow-molded angel that Dad had placed on the front lawn as part of our outdoor light display. After it happened a few times, Dad decided he'd had enough: he filled her with about 20 pounds of sand and she stayed anchored to the front lawn until it was time to dismantle the Christmas lights.

Some of our happiest early memories of winter and the Christmas season revolved around snow and ice sports—tobogganing, skating and of course ice hockey!

In those years, the consistently cold winter weather supported outdoor neighborhood ice rinks—lots of snow for the base and freezing night temperatures for flooding. For several years, our Dad made the rink in Rupert Park. He'd put on several layers of clothing and the flying boots and gauntlets he'd worn in the Lancaster bombers in the war. He would stand outside for two hours flooding the ice. The best time for ice formation was 2 AM when the temperatures were 32F or lower.

The rink was ready for use in early December and during the Christmas holidays it was filled every day with kids skating and playing hockey. The boys would walk to the park with the hockey equipment and the family shovel. In those days, the rink users took responsibility for clearing the ice. Night skating was great fun: the ice was like glass and the air was cold, cold, cold.

A few weeks before Christmas, our family would make a trip to Toronto to see “The Windows”. They were of course the store windows of the downtown Eaton’s and Simpson’s stores. Every window in both stores was decorated with Christmas scenes—colorful animated displays of Santa’s workshop with toys, elves, reindeer and Santa and Mrs. Claus.

And then there was Toyland! Half the fun was the trip up to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor in the old elevator. A lady in a blue uniform, wearing white gloves, would operate the big lever and say, “Going up!” after closing the wooden gates. The elevator was definitely more fun than the escalator even if it made your tummy feel funny. Toyland was magical: we could even visit Santa there. But the sheer number of toys in Toyland was overwhelming.

To really decide what we wanted Santa to bring, we pored over the Eaton’s and Simpson’s Christmas catalogues. Some of the “hot” toys of the day included Give a Show projectors, Easy Bake ovens, Ben Casey doctor’s bags, Meccano sets, Slinky’s, table hockey games, Beauty dolls, Barbie dolls, doll houses and those were just a couple of pages worth!

A week or so before Christmas we would set up the Christmas tree (Christmas decorating didn’t begin right after Halloween in those days). The Lions Club sold Christmas trees from a vacant lot behind the little Santa’s House that had been set up on Main Street. The choice was Scotch Pine or Spruce for \$2.25. We still recall the excitement of picking out a prickly Scotch pine tree in the early darkness of a winter afternoon. The tree would be snow-covered and half frozen. The obliging Lions Club member would pull out the tree we pointed to, bang it on the ground a few times, then push the snow-laden branches down a bit, demonstrating how the branches would fall out to the desired fullness.

Dad would nail a small stand of 2x4’s to the base of the tree. As it thawed in the warmth of the oil furnace, the fresh scent of pine filled the house. Then Dad would bring two cardboard boxes of decorations down from the attic. Big multi-colored lights with foil reflectors lit the tree with brightly-glowing colors, while spun glass “angel hair” softened the prickly pine branches. Silver foil icicles were draped on every branch. Candy canes and an assortment of colored glass balls completed the tree decorations. Then the final

touch: setting up Kevin's Lionel electric train set on the floor at the base of the tree, complete with transformer so we could actually run the train around the tree.

Christmas cards were an integral part of Christmas in the 50's and 60's. We remember Mom and Dad sitting together, writing the cards to relatives, friends and neighbors. It was 2 cents to send a card in town, envelope unsealed. By the time Christmas arrived, cards covered every available surface—coffee tables, the dining room hutch, the top of the TV, the piano.

These days as we walk past the stores on Stouffville's Main Street, we visualize the old storefronts and businesses of the late 50's and early 60's and the Christmas shopping experience in downtown Stouffville before malls, big box stores and online shopping.

Colored Edison-style lights were strung across Main Street and Christmas carols were played on outside speakers mounted on hydro poles, welcoming shoppers to the business district. There was scarcely an item that could not be purchased on Main Street, whether it was clothing, appliances, furniture, toys, tools or the Christmas turkey. Both Crest Hardware and Hendrick's Hardware had Toylands in their stores. The downtown merchants stayed open till 9 PM on weekends (10 PM Fridays) throughout December. Most held lucky draws for great prizes during the Christmas shopping season.

The Santa Claus parade was then, as it is now, a highlight of the Christmas season in Stouffville. The Stouffville Tribune reported that in 1960 thousands lined Main Street for the Santa Claus parade. There were 3 bands, 30 floats and parade queen Elaine Forsyth was chauffeured along the route in a red and white 1961 Buick convertible. Free candy and treats, prepared by ladies and friends of the Businessmen's Association, were distributed to the children watching the parade. A couple of years later, we recall Santa arriving by helicopter in Memorial Park.

By Christmas Eve, the fresh turkey was waiting to be cooked Christmas Day, the beautifully wrapped presents were under the tree and the sweet wine and shortbread were set out for Santa. At 9:30 we gathered in the living room and turned the black and white TV to CHCH TV Channel 11 for the quintessential Christmas movie, "A Christmas Carol" starring Alastair Sim. Every so often, the movie would be interrupted by a news bulletin from NORAD that Santa's sleigh had been spotted in the sky and the location would be given.

Christmas morning was the time for opening gifts and seeing what Santa had brought. There's nothing like the feeling of being 5 years old and walking out to a glowing tree in a still dark living room and seeing a canvas tent, a doll as tall as you were, a doll

carriage, hockey sticks and games and paint sets and puppets and treats under the tree, having magically appeared overnight.

