



12-15-1993

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Recommended Citation

Long, Keith (1993) "The Christmas Pony and Socket Set," *Westview*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol13/iss2/3>

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THE CHRISTMAS PONY AND SOCKET SET

Keith Long

My childhood has only gotten good since I've grown up. Back when I was going through it, I thought it all a pretty mundane exercise, what with having to get my hair cut, going to school, feeding the dog, and trying to keep generally clean during the whole operation. If it hadn't been for some convenient lies thought up by my parents—namely Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy—I may have lain prostrate throughout pre-adolescence. Still, I became something of a procrastinator, especially in the area of good behavior. My detractors claim I still have problems.

I can remember that my procrastination began during my sixth year, and the Christmas season was pretty much to blame for it. I was convinced about this “naughty or nice” stuff, and I knew that I wouldn't get my Christmas pony again if I didn't shape up and make something of myself around the house.

But putting off is easier than shaping up.

I knew December was the month for being good. I stayed apprised of the situation, listened to all the Christmas songs on the radio, and gleaned what I could by eavesdropping on adult conversations. I began feeling the holiday crunch the day after Thanksgiving, and in my heart of hearts, I really did want to be nice. But, even as a kid, things come up.

Two weeks before Christmas that year, only

hours after I had spent most of my morning discussing the world horse situation with Santa Claus outside the Foodtown Grocery Store, my dad came home to find me out by the red barn. I was practicing my slingshot, which seemed a pretty harmless activity since I wasn't maiming any neighborhood pets or marauding the old ladies who carried groceries down the alley. In fact, I had set up a target on the side of the barn. I had taken a bottle cap, tied a six-foot string to it, and had it swinging back and forth as I hammered away at it.

“Hit it yet?” my dad asked when he saw the setup.

“Nope, but I ain't missed the barn hardly none.” I let fly with a round, which missed the bottle cap by several yards but made a loud wallop when it whammed into the sheet metal of the barn.

“Goodness,” said dad, “what're you using for ammunition?”

“I dunno. Found 'em in the barn.” Dad took a step up and looked in my ammo bucket.

“Hey,” he said with an ominous hint of alarm in his voice, “that's my socket set!”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, the 3/4 has a really great hum, but the 7/8th's got more knockdown power.”

“These are all ruined!” my dad hollered, getting down on his knees and lining them up by size.

“No they're not,” I said, fishing the 5/8 out of my pants pocket. “Looky here: I bet I shot this one 400 times today and it's only a little bent up.”

My dad began walking around on all fours, digging through the grass. "They're not all here. Where's the rest of them?"

"Well, there's a couple of the bigger ones under the barn. Too heavy. I undershot them."

Dad looked up at me. "And the smaller ones?"

"Overshot. Somewhere down by the railroad, I reckon."

Father reckoned on the spot that I wouldn't get my Christmas pony that year. I never got my Christmas pony. The very next Christmas I was thwarted only two days before the big event. Harv and I were digging around in my backyard. We were hoping to find some earthworms, even though we'd been told they went deep in winter.

So we went deep.

Most great discoveries, it seems, happen when somebody is doing something very unimportant, like yelling for Watson in the next room or digging for earthworms. So Harv and I were understandably excited when we uncovered the remains of a dinosaur in my very own backyard. We excavated the rest of the afternoon, and had exposed about a forty-foot length of the creature by the time dad got home. He was able to sneak up on us, since we were down in the digs, shovels flying.

"What's going on?" my dad asked, an ominous hint of alarm in his voice.

"We're discovering stuff," I said, tossing up a shovelful of dirt without even turning around. "A dinosaur." I looked up, indicated the forty-foot length. "We think it's a tooth. A saber-tooth incisor." I went back to work.

"That's a sewer pipe!" Dad yelled.

Harv and I quit shoveling and looked at each other.

"Wow!" I said. "I didn't even know dinosaurs had sewer pipes."

I went Christmas-ponyless again. In lieu, I got socks or something.

So here I am, a non-horseman at 36. The other day Quay, the 12-year-old resident of our household, and I found ourselves in the garage at the same time. I was throwing stuff around and muttering something about fuel pumps and Detroit engineers. He was strolling through with a measuring tape and evaluating the garage's worth as a pony barn.

"Have you seen my socket set?" I asked.

"You mean that sling-shot ammo?" he asked, an ominous hint of alarm in his voice.