
Nanny's Christmases

Ida Vowell Robertson

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Like Home for the Holidays" stirs the memory of my mother “getting ready for Christmas”!

That memory brings a veritable avalanche of more memories with it—memories of children secretly making and hiding gifts from one another; counting the endless December days; watching for the mailman’s slow hack and rushing to the mailbox to see if the Christmas postal cards had come from Mama’s aunts in faraway Indiana. Such beautiful cards they were, encrusted with velvet angels or Santa Clauses amid sprinkles of gold or silver glitter. Now, you can understand why Christmas cards are the remembrances I cherish most of all even today.

My childhood home was a small frame farm house on the Custer County homestead my father had inherited from his father. In that rather isolated area, all holidays were big events, but Christmas was the favorite and most exciting for us all.

Mama had been orphaned when very young and thus had formed an unusually strong bonding with my three older siblings, my father, and me. She showed her love by always being cheery and happy with us. Every day was a day to remember—"This is the day the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Papa was a serious-minded little man whose whole world revolved around Methodism, family, school, and the outside world of the DAILY OKLAHOMAN. Papa was full of
music. When I was little, I sat on his feet while he played the guitar and sang to me. Strangely, I remember only "Old Dan Tucker." He was a terrific fiddler, and I loved to hear him play "Dead Sea Waltz," "Turkey in the Straw," "Red Wing," and the Methodist Revival Meeting songs. He thought that dancin' was one of the seven great sins. With a guilty conscience, I would hide behind the door in the next room and twist and twirl in my grey outing flannel petticoats to the beat of "Red Wing."

At night, Papa and Mama sat at opposite ends of the "library table" with a kerosene lamp between them. He would read and she would either read or crochet. Then just as my brother, Lee, and I would be having great fun, Papa would lay the paper down, hand the Bible to Mama and say, "Julie, it's time to read." Then "Julie" would read a chapter from the Bible. (one winter she read PILGRIM'S PROGRESS to us). Then we would all kneel on the cold floor and Mama would pray. If Papa wasn't too tired, he'd say, "Julie, let's have 'Sweet Hour of Prayer'." She would accompany his fiddle on a pump organ (before we got the piano) to play that beloved hymn. Many evenings, he would just sit and "fiddle." Doubtless this nightly ritual was the sustaining force that gave them strength for day after day of endless work.

My niece, who lives in California, took the old violin after Papa's death; her husband refinished it and mounted it on red velvet. Today, it hangs in her beautiful home—far removed from the humble farm home where it had brought so much beauty into the lives of our little family.

And now for Christmas. Papa and Mama always made Christmas special, regardless of whether the crops had been poor or good. One Christmas, Papa made each of us little trunks for our doll clothes. Mama covered them with bright cretonne, and they were real treasures.

The first Christmas that I remember must have been when I was about three years old. I got a rag doll almost as tall as I was. She had shoe-button eyes, embroidered features, and long black braids made from "Old Dollie's" mane. How I loved "Old Sal"! Her body outlasted three or four heads, but the braids were always transferred to the new heads.

I remember quite well my fourth Christmas. Mama had us all gathered around the heating stove after dark. All at once, we heard a terrible clatter and Lee said, "Oh, Santa Claus on the roof!" He took me to the door to look for Santa; when I turned around, Mama handed me a beautiful baby doll which I supposed Santa had put down the chimney. I was so excited that I didn't notice Papa, slipping down the stairs or guess that he had made the reindeer clatter.

Then I started to school and the whole month
of December we “got ready for Christmas.” We prepared little plays and learned the old Christmas carols. We always had a big cedar tree which we lavishly decorated with paper chains and strings of popcorn and cranberries. On the big night, there would be a basket filled with sacks of candy, nuts, and oranges under the tree. These sacks were called “treats.” Parents would bring gifts for their children and hang them on the tree.

That first Christmas, I spied a beautiful bisque dolly high up near the top of the tree. I never for a moment considered that this beauty could be for me. And then Santa took it down and said, “This doll is for a very good little girl, Ida Vowell.” Before I recovered from the shock, he handed me a little red doll buggy, and wonder of wonders, I was again surprised when he presented me with a book titled NIXIE BUNNY IN WORKADAY LAND. My teacher had given it to me for reading the most books in my class. My great night ended when we rode home through the snow in the buggy. I clutched my dolly in my arms and went to sleep between Mama and Papa. Heaven surely could hold no greater joy!

My most treasured memory of a Christmas is the one when our family was plagued with illness and crop failure. I was nine years old and in the fifth grade. There were no school buses in those days, and Papa rented a room in a friend’s home in Clinton for Lee, Muriel, and Nell to live in and go to high school. They came home each weekend. Lee was fourteen years old and in the ninth grade.

We had had a drought and had not made much money from the cotton crop. Papa and two neighbors got jobs in town and drove to work in an open Model “T” touring car. With his earnings, we were getting along fine, but Papa was never a strong man and about the first of December, he was stricken with rheumatism and was bedfast for months. He lay and endured great pain and worried about his family, but he never complained. Mama would heat the smoothing irons, wrap them in towels, and put them around him to ease the pain. He had no medication except Rawleigh’s liniment.

One morning a couple of weeks before Christmas, Mama walked out to the gate with me to start to school. I had my lunch in a Mary June Molasses bucket and my book satchel over my shoulder. I wore a long stocking cap that wrapped around my neck, my wool mittens, and a pair of despised black overshoes. It was very still, no wind at all, and the snow was falling in big white, feathery flakes. Mama said, “The old woman up in the sky is picking her geese.” Mama was wearing a long black coat. She held out her arm, let the snow flakes fall on it, and said, “Millions of snowflakes, but no two are alike.” I could see many shapes and sizes of snowflakes on her black sleeve.

Well, it snowed and snowed and the
beautiful snowflakes became deep drifts and practically blocked the roads. Lee finally realized that Mama couldn’t do the chores and take care of the animals alone, so he came home to help. This broke my parents’ hearts as they knew he would probably lose a half year of school.

Mama was afraid the girls wouldn’t be able to get home for Christmas. I heard her worry to Lee that she hadn’t bought me a doll before the storm and worst of all she wouldn’t be able to get out to cut a Christmas tree. One day, Lee went out into the pasture and brought back a little wild plum bush. Mama wrapped each branch with green crepe paper, and Lee found some old strings of tinsel. We strung popcorn and made paper chains from the colored pages of the Sears catalog. We had great fun making the decorations, and we thought that our Christmas tree was simply beautiful.

Muriel and Nell got home some way—I have no idea how—but they did. Mama and Papa were so relieved and happy to have us all at home. The girls had brought a doll for me and got it to Mama. I was sent to bed early every night, and I could hear whispers and giggles—but never dreamed that they were dressing my doll.

Christmas morning dawned. It was cold and the ground seemed to have been covered with snow forever, but everyone was so happy because “Baby” wouldn’t be disapp
brown scissortail eggs—and the little white eggs in the doves’ nests on the ground. She remembered much poetry she had learned in school and would recite poems to us as we walked across the field to work in the vegetable garden. She especially loved Lord Byron’s “Roll on thou deep blue ocean, roll/ Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in Vain.” In my childish inexperienced mind, I couldn’t associate an ocean, which I’d never seen, with the rolling prairie.

Well, Mama finally got to visit both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in her later years, but not with Papa. He died at age sixty-one, two months to the day before my first baby was born.

Then, one by one, we grew up and left the farm, but it was always “Home for Christmas.” Times got better and gifts more plentiful and expensive, but we never forgot any of those childhood Christmases. Once, several years ago in mid-summer, my sister abruptly wrote at the end of a letter, “Say, do you remember the Christmas tree Mama made from a plum bush?” And another time, she wrote, “Do you remember that winter that Mama read PILGRIM’S PROGRESS and BEN HUR to us?”

Mary Anne was six months old our first Christmas without Papa. Mama and Nell and her family were there. We delayed the meal, dreading to sit down with Papa gone. Little Mary Anne saved the day. Her high chair was close to the table, and she leaned over and grabbed the turkey by a leg. All of us laughed. Always when I am doing my Christmas cooking, I remember how Mama loved to cook for us. I remember her gumdrop cakes, her banana nut cakes, her popcorn cakes, and all her pretty little salads. In later years, when we went to her home for Christmas, she would rush outside from the kitchen to greet us, rolling her kitchen apron around her arms to keep warm. Such wonderful love!

Finally she had a beautiful set of china, crystal, silver, and a linen table service. She always said, “I love to set a pretty table!”

Mama had the real spirit of Christmas in her heart, and she passed it on to each of us.

Thank God for Mama and Christmas!

We’re looking forward to another happy Christmas with YOU!▲

Love,
Nanny

IDA VOWELL ROBERTSON is a retired public-school English teacher who now lives and writes in Clinton.