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Leroy Thomas

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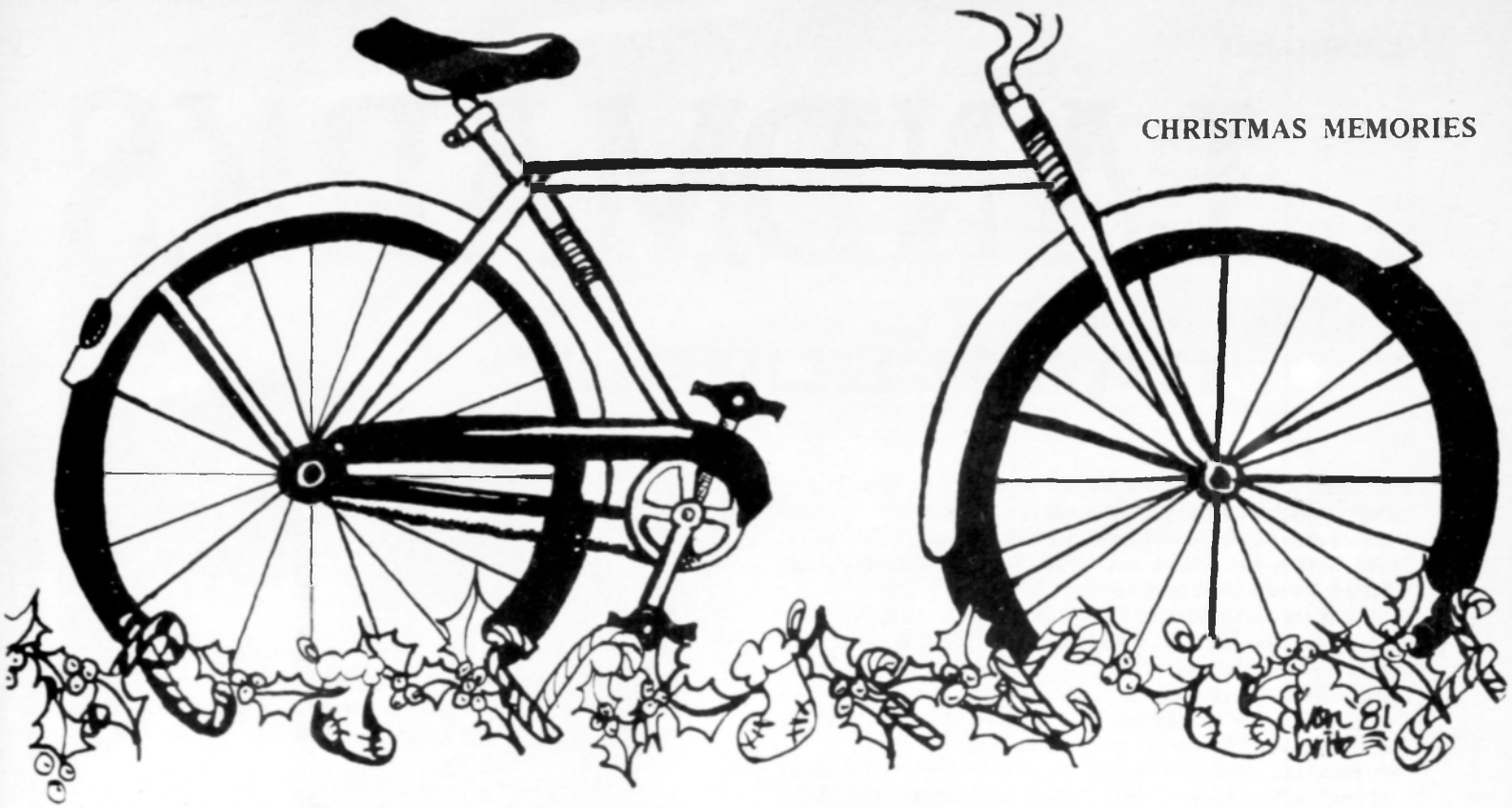
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GLOOMY CHRISTMAS CAROL = RED BICYCLE

— Leroy Thomas

For as long as I can remember, my parents always sang the same carol beginning around December 1 each year: "Well, Old Santa Claus is gonna be mighty slim around our homestead this year."

By the time I was 12 years old, all of my siblings were already away from home. My two sisters had married, and my only brother had died in World War II; therefore, when my parents began to sing their carol that winter of my twelfth year, I felt more alone than ever with no one around my age to share my despair. My special problem was that I so badly wanted a red Monarch bicycle that I knew I must have it. In fact, even in the middle of the carol one day I had blurted out my wish. I felt that I deserved it. After all, if I hadn't been expected to help them get their cotton pulled during my Harvest Vacation, I could have made some money of my own and bought that coveted red Monarch in the window of the OTASCO in town.

My older sister, Juanita, lived in Mangum, Oklahoma, a few miles away, and I had the habit of visiting her and her husband, Lee Roy, each time I was in town. Her husband had in a sense taken the place of my dead brother, and those visits were special to me.

I also liked to visit Ernie, a boy my age who lived down the street from them. Although Ernie was a town kid, he and I got along very well together.

One day on one of my routine visits, I walked unannounced into my sister's kitchen. The room was a mess. Papers were spread all over the place, and Lee was on the floor painting an old bicycle red. Thinking back later, I remembered that both of them looked very flustered and Juanita yelled at me. "Now, you have to help us keep a secret. Grace bought this bike for Ernie, and we're helping her out by painting it and keeping it for her until Christmas Eve. If you breathe a word of this,

you'll have me to pay, Little Brother!" I promised to say nothing, and I kept my promise.

As Christmas Eve approached, excitement was afloat as usual, but I promised myself not to mention to my parents again what I wanted for Christmas. After all, wasn't that the price of martyrdom? And wasn't I a martyr?

It was our custom at that time to go to Lee Roy and Juanita's house for a gift exchange. That year I received a varied assortment of gifts: socks, pajamas, gloves, a shirt or two, a winter hat and muffler, and a few other things — even shaving lotion not to be used for at least a few more months. And that seemed to be the end of the matter.

Suddenly Lee Roy excused himself with an "I'll be back in a minute. I need to take care of something outside." In a few minutes he came back into the living room pushing the most beautiful red bike I had ever seen; it was even complete with speedometer, reflectors, a front light, and a horn.

My dad said, "Well, Son, it's not the red Monarch from OTASCO, but it's the best we could do this year. I hope you like it. And I want you to thank Lee Roy and Juanita. They're the ones who really made it possible."

I hurriedly thanked everyone, donned my winter hat and muffler, jumped on that bike, and rode out the front door oblivious of steps. I rode all over town stopping to tell every friend and relative I could find about the gift I knew that I would never forget.

Secondhand bikes don't last very long, though, and two years later I was sporting a souped-up version of the red Monarch at the OTASCO — bought from my very own money that I had saved from farm jobs.

There have been many materialistic highlights in my life since that Christmas of 1946, but none has quite equaled the joy I felt when I first realized that the red bike was really mine. ■