

CHAPTER 3

A SPECIAL SEASON IN BROWNSVILLE: SHARING CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

Mrs. McMichael hesitated, but only for a second.

Then she dumped the entire contents of a second box of soap flakes into the big metal pot. She vigorously stirred them into the already milky white water as her husband Ken looked on approvingly.

“That should make a fine glazing,” he told her.

She continued to beat the thickening lather until it took on the texture of whipped cream. When it had reached the proper consistency, the couple began to apply the white frosting to the boughs of a tall evergreen tree that graced the entry hall of Brownsville’s Prospect Street School. They carefully worked their homemade “snow” around the blue lights they had already arranged on the tree, daubing the foam on each branch until the pine tree appeared to have weathered a fresh snowfall.

Mrs. McMichael stepped back a few steps to admire their handiwork. Her husband, who had disappeared momentarily, now returned from the basement where he had been stoking the fire in the school’s big furnace.

“It really looks beautiful,” Ken said.

“It took a lot of our ration stamps for the soap,” his wife replied, but she was pleased with the results. “It’s worth it. Oh, won’t the children ‘ooh’ and ‘ah’ when they see it!”

One first grader who gazed in awe at that magnificent frosted tree was a little girl named Hannah Millward.

“It seemed gigantic to me,” Hannah Millward Fisher told me recently. “All of the classes came out into the central hall of Prospect Street School to sing Christmas carols. World War II was underway and everything was rationed, but the custodian, Ken McMichael, and his wife had used their own money and ration stamps to frost and decorate the tree. It was beautiful.”

It is one of Hannah’s fondest memories of Christmas.

What are your favorite holiday memories? Are they of giving a special gift or going Christmas caroling? Attending a beautiful midnight

Mass, having a childhood visit with Santa, or enjoying a unique family tradition? This holiday season some of my readers have passed along their favorite memories of Christmases past, which I will now share with you.

Nowadays the religious significance of the holiday struggles to maintain its place of importance. The buying, wrapping and receiving of Christmas presents often receives the lion's share of attention. Yet I have noticed that a number of my readers' favorite memories are centered, not around gifts, but on just being with family and enjoying the camaraderie of friends and relatives.

Many of the readers whose memories I will share with you no longer live near Brownsville or in western Pennsylvania. Their holiday memories of the town and how they celebrated the season so many years ago are often simple and poignant.

"Boy, there's so much I remember about Christmases past," says Russ Moorhouse, an area native who now calls Stevensville, Maryland home. "Thanks to an uncle who was an avid home movie taker, I have many of those memories now preserved on videotape, which I can still watch today. Watching them, I feel a mixture of emotions, since many of the relatives and friends of the family in those movies are now deceased. But they were joyous times for me in the early fifties, when friends and family got together and visited one another, instead of holing up in their homes and watching television."

Phyllis Grossi of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, lived at 1400 Second Street with her parents, Phillip and Kathryn Barreca. She agrees that family and friends made the holiday special.

"Everyone in our area would be excited to get all dressed up on Christmas Eve and go to the midnight Mass. Then we would come back home, where relatives would be visiting and all the goodies were brought out to munch on. The neighbors in my area of Second Street would visit back and forth. On Christmas morning the smell of cooking and baking would be coming from the kitchen while we were all looking at our gifts. Usually we got a doll, maybe a dress and a stocking with fruit and candy, but to us that was the greatest."

West Brownsville native Sherman Elias, now of White Oak, is Jewish, and he fondly recalls the holiday season as a time when he shared his Christian friends' traditions.

"As a young boy growing up in West Brownsville, I had a very good friend, Bill Sorenson, with whom I spent Christmas Eve for many years. I am of the Jewish faith, but I enjoyed helping the Sorenson's trim their tree. It really was a family affair, and I was pleased to be part of it. Mr. and Mrs. Sorenson (Dan and Gay) were beautiful people and I

just blended in.

“After we trimmed the tree, we would end up at the Paladium, which was above the post office in West Brownsville. No one had a better time than we all did. The Paladium was the place to go for dancing, and the kids came from all around. I don’t recall how much it cost to get in, but there was an admission fee. No hard drinks, just Cokes and burgers.

“After that, we went back to Bill’s house, and I always slept there on Christmas Eve. On one occasion, we even went to a midnight service in one of the churches on Second Street in Brownsville. Brownsville was a wonderful town to grow up in. My boyhood years are very vivid in my mind. I recall standing on the steps inside the Prospect Street School where we all sang carols.”

If anything brings the feeling that Christmas has truly arrived, it is the sound of Christmas carols in the air and a fresh white blanket of newly fallen snow. Shirley Beck Johnson of Pittsburgh grew up on Blainesburg hill. She moved away to Cleveland as a young woman to find employment. Shirley, who is my cousin, shared with me an experience involving my own family that is her favorite Christmas memory. It is a simple story that captures the special feeling that only Christmas can bring.

“I had lived in Cleveland for a long time,” she remembers, “but I always made it home for Christmas. I haven’t missed one yet. My mother was living in Finleyville by then, but the day after Christmas, my mother, stepfather and I decided to come to Blainesburg to visit aunts and uncles, many of whom still live there.

“We went to your parents’ house first,” Shirley told me, “and visited there for a while. But as I only had one chance a year to visit, I didn’t want to spend all of my time in one place, so I decided I would walk up the hill three blocks to visit my aunt and uncle, Ed and Peg Tunney.

“Your sister Kathy said she would go too. She and I started out only to discover that while we had been inside, it had snowed quite a lot and nobody had been out in it yet. It was a beautiful, freshly fallen untrampled snow. The night was clear, the stars bright, and although it was cold, it was not bitter and it felt good to be out in it.

“Kathy and I reached Ed and Peg’s and we visited there for a while. Then I said I was going to move on to try to visit more relatives while I could. I said I was going to two other relatives’ homes a few blocks further up Jefferson Avenue. I was amazed when Peggy and Kathy said they would go with me! So now there were three of us. We threw on our warm clothing, stepped out into the night, and saw that still no cars had driven over the snow. Ours were the only tracks, and it was a

beautiful winter night. And so we spontaneously decided to sing Christmas carols as we walked.

“We sang everything we knew! We went to the next two stops, visited each relative for a while, and guess what? My aunts Ruth and Pearl, in turn, both decided to join us as we walked on to visit two more relatives’ homes in Blainesburg. Now we were a group of five, still singing as we walked in the starlit snow.

“It was such a high! I can’t describe how wonderful it felt. We finally made it the five or six blocks to my uncle Earl’s and then to my brother’s house. I wasn’t able to participate in the walk back, as by that time my mother and stepfather had come to fetch me to go back to Finleyville, but I believe the others all walked back as we had come, still singing carols and just enjoying being together in God’s beautiful world.

“I had such a wonderful time that evening. The actual physical closeness of my family, all living in the same community which made that kind of evening possible, and the emotional closeness of people who would want to do that. That is one of my most precious Christmas memories.”

***ETHNIC MEALS AND VISITS WITH SANTA:
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON***

Six-year-old Russell stared at the ring on Santa’s finger. What could this mean?

His thoughts were confused, and his mind raced to devise a logical explanation for what he was seeing. Could it be true? Could Santa Claus actually be a thief?

It happened half a century ago on the night of the children’s Christmas program at the First Methodist Church of Brownsville. The play was over, and the youngsters had assembled on the small stage at the front of the church’s social room to acknowledge their guests’ applause. From outside the building came the musical jangling of sleigh bells, followed by a robust “Ho, Ho, Ho!” The doors to the social room were flung open, and into the room strutted Santa Claus himself, a huge bag of presents slung over his shoulder.

Russell and the other children rushed forward gleefully to greet old Saint Nick. As Russell approached Santa, he noticed that the jolly old fellow was not wearing his customary shiny black boots. Instead he was sporting ordinary “civilian” shoes that were, in fact, a lot like Russell’s father’s shoes. The children’s laughter around him faded in Russell’s

ears as his gaze moved upward on Santa's ample red-clad body. When his eyes reached Santa's ungloved left hand, he was stunned by what he saw there.

"I didn't recognize his face or his voice," remembers Russ Moorhouse fifty years later. "But there was Santa wearing my dad's shoes and his ring. What a mixture of thoughts raced through my young mind! Could my dad really be Santa Claus? What boy wouldn't have loved to believe that? But that thought quickly vanished, as I realized I had seen Dad many times at his work in the Brownsville post office. Maybe Dad was one of Santa's official helpers that you would see on the street corners. But no, I was sure I would have heard about that or seen his Santa suit in the house at some point.

"The thought of Santa taking my dad's ring and shoes just didn't make any sense either. Here was a guy who could have anything. Why would he want my dad's stuff? A quick look around the room for my dad turned up nothing. That left only one conclusion: that this wasn't the real Santa. This was my dad playing Santa!

"I was tempted to blurt out, 'You're not Santa, you're my dad!' However, I kept my cool, and I began to think about the rumors I had been hearing from older kids. That there really isn't a Santa Claus, that it's just a story your parents tell you so you'll be good all year. I wasn't ready to accept that. How could there not be a Santa? Would my parents lie to me about such an important thing as that?

"I was very quiet on the ride home. When my parents asked what was wrong, I told them that I knew Dad was the Santa. I could tell by the way they glanced at each other that they knew they were on the spot. My mother said, 'Where did you ever get that idea?' She didn't know that I had evidence.

"I presented my case, noting that since my dad was still in possession of the shoes and the ring, it had to be him dressed as Santa. This brought another glance between my parents. Now I really had them.

"After a long pause, my dad explained, 'They tried to get the real Santa, but he was real busy at this time of year, finishing up getting all the toys together. So Santa sent one of his suits to the post office for me to use tonight.'"

Half a century later, Russ Moorhouse looks back on that night.

"For that one evening, my dad was an 'officially appointed Santa.' I wanted to believe that more than anything. For a few more years I tried to convince myself that it was the truth, holding on to one of the fragile threads of childhood, but the evidence and the rumor remained in the back of my mind, gnawing away at the fantasy."

For those who were still believers, it seemed that Santa was

everywhere! Phyllis Grossi grew up on Second Street on Brownsville's South Side. There was one place in particular where she could count on having a one-on-one audience with the Bearded One.

"Every year," she recalls, "the men from the bar at Mickey Check's Bar and Hotel on Water Street would have Santa Claus come to visit. Santa would give the children candy and popcorn, and then we were treated to cartoons. This was something all of us children looked forward to in the 1940s."

Of course, these pre-Christmas consultations with Santa were designed to allow children to present their "most wanted list" to Santa Claus himself, while Mom or Dad hovered nearby to surreptitiously guide Santa in his responses.

Kathleen Phelan's parents, Don and Stella Burack Laughery, were both Brownsville natives. They often drove from Baltimore to Brownsville to celebrate Christmas with Stella's parents, Mike and Barbara Burack, who lived on Baltimore Street across from the old hospital.

The snow-covered two-lane roads through the mountains of western Maryland and southwestern Pennsylvania often demanded Don and Stella's full attention on the six-hour trip. Little Kathleen, however, was perched in the back seat with a much more serious matter on her mind. It was the same worry felt by any child spending Christmas away from home.

How in the world, Kathleen wondered, would Santa Claus find her in Brownsville when her home was in Baltimore?

"I worried the whole time," recalls Kathleen, who now resides in Baltimore. "Christmas was exciting for me, but Christmas at my grandparents' house was even more magical. Grandpap Burack, whom I adored, had a way of making me feel like I was the most important person in the world.

"A highlight of visiting in the winter was accompanying him at night to bank the coal fire in the basement furnace. Looking into the door of that silver-painted monstrosity at the glowing coals was fascinating to me. To this day, I still love the smell of coal burning. It made me comfortable knowing that my grandparents had a fireplace and a chimney for Santa to come down, which we lacked in our home in Baltimore. ('Santa has keys to all the homes without chimneys,' I was assured.)"

Although Kathleen and most children focused primarily on Santa Claus and Christmas presents, young and old alike eagerly anticipated the culinary delights that highlighted the holiday season in southwestern Pennsylvania. Food, glorious food! For many folks, the holidays still

conjure up thoughts of baccalà in tomato sauce, kolachi bursting with nuts, or peroghis filled with potatoes, cheese or prunes. The rich ethnic heritage of this area was never more in evidence than at the dinner table on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

“My most significant memories,” Norma Marcolini Ryan of Brownsville told me, “are of Christmases spent with my grandparents, who lived on a farm near Perryopolis. My parents had a very traditional Italian home, and Christmas was centered around food.

“My memories are of my dad coming home from the Strip District in Pittsburgh with the imported Italian foods. He would bring the cheeses, salami, prosciutto, capicola, imported tuna fish, smelts, and baccalà. It was a Christmas Eve tradition to have baccalà in light tomato sauce, served with polenta and imported Fontina cheese.

“Another treat was to have the sweets from the Strip such as Jordan almonds, individually boxed and wrapped nougat candies, and dried fruit and nuts in the shells. We all gathered around as Dad unloaded the boxes and gave each of us a taste of the purchases. Meanwhile the house smelled wonderful with the homemade bread, pizzelles and biscotti that Mom would make while Dad was out shopping.”

Christmas dinner in the Burack household on Baltimore Street was equally mouth-watering.

“Grandmother Burack was a marvelous cook,” Kathleen Phelan remembers. “My dad told me of a Christmas before my time when Grandmother roasted a whole suckling pig with an apple in its mouth! Thank goodness I missed that one, but during the holidays, I can still remember, wafting throughout her house, the wonderful smells of halupki; kolachi filled with nuts, poppy seeds, or apricots; strudel filled with apples; peroghi filled with potatoes, cheese or prunes; and other delectables.”

Experts say that a familiar aroma can bring back memories from years ago.

“Not long ago,” said Kathleen, “I attended a local Orthodox church supper here in Baltimore, where they featured Slavic foods. There were lots of folks there with Western Pennsylvania accents. Those delicious aromas brought back wonderful memories of my grandparents and brought tears to my eyes.”

Family holiday meals and visits with Santa are two cherished Christmas traditions. The evolution of a child’s relationship with Santa Claus is a part of the coming of age. As we grow up, the wonder of Santa’s magic is replaced by an appreciation for the generosity of spirit that conceived the jolly old elf.

It is a spirit born of the love of children and a yearning for

innocence. The legend of Santa Claus creates for a child the wonderful illusion that all of his transgressions can be forgiven, and his repentance rewarded, on one glorious night.

As we seek spiritual renewal in this holiday season, shouldn't we allow the little children to lead the way? In their innocence, they instinctively sense what we may have forgotten in our worldly sophistication.

They've always known the truth about Santa Claus.

***UNIQUE CHRISTMAS GIFTS AND HOLIDAY SHOPPING
IN THE BROWNSVILLE OF YESTERYEAR***

Our look at Christmases Past concludes with tales of Christmas shopping in mid-twentieth century Brownsville and memories of some special Christmas gifts. Many current and former residents of the Brownsville area have called or written to share their stories.

Grindstone native Rosalie Renshaw Coughenour, now of Hopwood, remembers a childhood gift that was nearly a disaster.

"In 1946," she wrote, "things were tight because of the recent world war. For several years, my great desire had been to have a chemistry set, because I had hopes of being a scientist, a doctor, or a great researcher.

"On Christmas morning, I was on top of the world when I opened my gift from my grandparents. It was a large chemistry set with a book of experiments I could do. I was on my way to a career! Two days after Christmas, my cousin Lana Jean came over to visit and promptly drank the phenolphthalein out of the set.

"She had a whopping stomach ache but was not further injured, probably due to the very small amount of ingredients in each bottle. The doctor was called, appropriate treatment given, and the chemistry set was confiscated by my grandparents, never to be seen again! It was replaced by a scooter with a foot pump to self-propel it. After that scary day, nobody ever mentioned the chemistry set again."

Thomasene Florence Jackson of Detroit was quick to try out one of her favorite childhood Christmas gifts.

"Most of us got new sleds for Christmas," Tomi told me. "I lived at 222 Cadwallader Street. We would make snowballs, freeze them, and sharpen the blades on our sleds. Then we would sled-ride down Cadwallader and turn at what we called the 'Breaker' near the Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church."

Woe to anyone who missed that turn. It was really downhill from

there!

Chemistry sets and sleds were popular presents, but for Bill Patterson growing up in the 1930s, there was one gift that he always wanted but never got. It was a particular red toy fire truck.

“Brownsville did not have a toy store as such,” Bill explained to me, “but several establishments expanded into that area seasonally. Besides Murphy’s Five and Ten, Coulter’s Hardware, near Fiddles on Water Street, put in a line of toys at Christmas. Even Cohen’s Wallpaper, a narrow storeroom near the bend of the Neck, sold toys and seasonal items.”

But the gift that young Bill had his heart set on was in a store farther up the street.

“Goldstein’s Women’s Store turned their entire basement into a toy center each year,” he recalled, “and it was a highlight of the season to go there, look and wish. Goldstein’s had a few expensive toys that seemed to go on from year to year without being sold. One was a red fire truck displayed high on the wall. It was well out of reach, and its price was \$20, far beyond what any shopper in Depression-era Brownsville was likely to pay for a toy. All of the kids I played with talked about it, and every year we would go down to Goldstein’s hoping to see the red fire truck.

“That fire truck taught me a useful childhood lesson. I learned that one doesn’t always get everything he wants, and that there needs to be something to dream about. I wonder what ever happened to that red fire truck.”

Wally Mulligan of Pecos, New Mexico, also learned that there was a limit on what a kid should ask for.

“It was 1943,” Wally wrote, “and World War II was casting a pall over the holiday. The Depression was over, but the war was draining the economy, and I was reminded daily that ‘money was tight.’

“I was eight years old, and during the Christmas season, my dad promised me a special Christmas gift – a chocolate sundae at the dairy bar next to the municipal building. The sundae, which cost fifteen cents, consisted of vanilla ice cream, chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. We ate our sundaes, and I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Nothing before or since has ever tasted so good.

“My mom had been out shopping this cold winter night, and she entered the dairy bar, cheeks red, her coat dusted with snow. She had a cup of coffee, and the three of us headed out to the car. I was holding her hand, and I looked up and asked, ‘Mom, some Christmas can I have a banana split?’

“She turned and looked at me incredulously. ‘Do you think we’re

made of money?’ she said. ‘They cost twenty five cents!’

“The lesson stuck. I have never had a banana split, but I can still taste that sundae. It was the best Christmas gift I ever had.”

Eating highlighted shopping excursions to downtown Brownsville. Norma Marcolini Ryan enjoyed childhood visits to a familiar eatery in Brownsville.

“Dad had no patience to shop,” said Norma. “Instead, he would go to Fiddles and chat with his coal miner friends, and then we would meet him there and have our special treat of a hot dog and root beer. Dad, of course, had beer from the other side of Fiddles.”

For Tomi Jackson, the place to go was another well-known confectionery in the Neck.

“I would love to stop by Johnson’s Nut Shop,” she said. “I can still smell the roasted nuts that were on display.” She ate some of those nuts while watching the traditional downtown Christmas parade.

“I remember the Christmas parades in Brownsville,” Tomi said. “Popcorn balls were thrown from the fire trucks, and I would watch my older sister and cousin march in the high school band. Santa was at the G. C. Murphy store and could often be seen walking the streets.”

Margaret Fleming Johnson of Brownsville recalls, “The Brownsville high school band was often costumed as elves and Santa’s helpers and played Christmas songs. Many groups sponsored floats, and Santa arrived on a fire truck, passing out candy treats donated by the local merchants.

“Shoppers walked to town from both hills, and many came by bus from all over town and from West Brownsville and California. The Greyhound Bus line brought shoppers from all points between Uniontown and Washington.

“The Union Station building was the hub for travelers and shoppers. Choirs and musical groups caroled in the Union Station waiting room, where it was warm, there were benches for resting and waiting, and the restrooms were clean. In stores all over town could be heard the constant chatter of customers, many with broken English or speaking in their own foreign language. And of course, another sound of Christmas was the ringing of the Salvation Army bells in front of G. C. Murphy’s Five and Ten.”

Rick Shaffer of Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, remembers one of the bell-ringers in particular.

“There was a little guy,” he wrote, “who throughout the year would do special sales promotions for local merchants by wearing a sandwich board bearing an appropriate pitch. He carried a bell that he incessantly

rang, while he continually mumbled to himself, ‘Ringa-da-bell, ringa-da-bell.’

“Then every Christmas season, somewhere in the Neck, there would appear a little skinny Santa. Dressed in a worn red suit, he had a scraggly white beard affixed by an elastic band under a healthy Roman nose. As this Santa rang his bell, bustling shoppers passing him were startled to hear him muttering, ‘Ringa-da-bell, ringa-da-bell, ringa-da-bell.’ Coincidence? You may be sure that many parents spent time explaining Santa’s need for lots of helpers.”

Murphy’s Five and Ten was a childhood shopper’s paradise for Hannah Millward Fisher of Tucson.

“Right after the Second World War, the First National Bank came into existence,” Hannah told me, “and it offered Christmas Clubs. If you put twenty-five cents into your account each week, you had the monstrous sum of \$12.50 to spend on Christmas gifts. I would go to the G. C. Murphy store to do my shopping.

“I still have a very tarnished cameo ring that I gave my mother for Christmas many years ago. It cost all of twelve cents. At holiday time, Murphy’s offered six to eight ounces of perfume for thirty cents, so my mother was also the lucky recipient of a garish bottle of perfume.”

Bonnie Bryan Magee of Erie recalls, “My parents, Sally and Jim Bryan of 517 Pearl Street, would take me downtown where the streets were brimming with shoppers. We always stopped to view the seemingly gigantic aluminum tree in the window of one of the furniture stores. Then we went into Hopson’s so that I could pick out the doll I wanted Santa to bring me.

“The evening always ended with a visit to Hagan’s, where my parents sipped coffee with friends and neighbors who had spent the evening downtown. I was treated to an ice cream cone, the tall shaped Hagan specialty variety.

“Another treat during the holidays was our visit to the home of a family that lived, I believe, on Church Street. I do not remember their name, but they had a gigantic train/village display, and they invited folks to stop in and view it during the holiday season.”

The season of caroling in newly fallen snow, enjoying Christmas Eve ethnic feasts, and renewing our relationship with Santa is enjoyed anew each year. A hearty “Thank You!” and “Merry Christmas!” to the kind readers who shared with us their memories of Brownsville’s Christmases Past.