

Memories of Christmas Past

Christmas of 2011 is almost here. We all have vivid memories of past Christmases from our childhood. In looking back over 100 years, it's interesting to consider what Christmas was like at that time as compared to the present. One means of accomplishing this "backward glance," is to look through the eyes of a memorable *Sentinel* editor and publisher as he vividly and eloquently relates his memories of Christmas as a child in Martin County during the early 1900s.

Claude Swanson, a native of Westford Township by Truman, was a venerable *Sentinel* editor and publisher who was especially well known for his celebrated column entitled, "*The Lake Breezes Whisper . . .*" that he took over for Frank Day upon Day's death in 1928. Swanson wrote about a multitude of topics, including Christmas. The following are several selected excerpts from his December 17, 1945, column descriptively relating his reflections of Christmas during his childhood in the early 1900's. His eloquent accounts may well bring to mind other long lost memories of Christmas past as well.

Swanson began by restating what he overheard from a local professional man of that time. "I'm glad I was born poor. I know what it means to get a thrill out of Christmas. Christmas has a different meaning for every individual. But really, it is the poor who get the real joy out of Christmas giving and Christmas receiving. Little things make them happy beyond description. The recipients know what they receive involves real sacrifices on the part of the giver."

He then recalled some Christmas presents he received as a child. "We recall the Christmases of the early 1900's in Westford. There was one thing we could count on – a bran' new mouth organ every Christmas from Uncle Andrew. Then there'd be a ball, a sack of candy, peanuts and nuts, and one Christmas – joy of joys, a toy locomotive about two feet long, the gift of the hired man. There was a bell on it and the drivers "rolled" just like on a big locomotive. Then there was the monkey with green cap and tassel, which would climb a string, the gift of Aunt Sophie. A book, 'Hans Brinker of the Silver Skates,' from Miss Burner, our teacher."

He went on to tell of the food, and how it differed as compared to the time of his writing in 1945. "Even the food was different in those days. Mush and milk at supper time, with perhaps 'salt herring.' 'Johnny cake' and milk. Home churned butter and buttermilk. Salt pork. Potato pancake, baked in the oven with a cut of fresh, lean side-pork on every piece. Vegetable sour cooked in an iron kettle, over a wood fire."

He portrayed the attire of the day in great detail. "Those were the days of wasp waists, seven petticoats, bustles, and long underwear. Rats in the hair, red faces, rugged complexions. Any girl that appeared with a peaches and cream complexion risked the chance of the he and she gossips saying 'she used corn starch to powder her face.'"

There was also, of course, the ever present repudiation of the younger generation and what they don't know by the old "duffers," of which he himself was included. "Of course we old duffers know all about these things, but the younger generation perhaps doesn't know that we used real candles – red, white, blue and green ones for the Christmas tree. That we trimmed the tree largely with strings of popcorn and popcorn balls. The top place was usually a glass star or trumpet. Used to smash one about every year gettin' the dang thing down."

Finally, Swanson summarized his feelings referring to his interpretation of the real meaning of Christmas in terms of the personal satisfaction in harking back to those many fond memories of Christmas past. "So we didn't get much for Christmas? Well, 'mebbe' not. But fellas, you'd have to pile up a pretty tall stack of stuff to equal in personal satisfaction, the joy we find in reminiscence. The toys of long ago are long since gone. But memories of those halcyon days grow richer, brighter with each passing year."

Swanson's colloquial descriptions depicting his childhood memories of Christmas point to a very different time, a much simpler time, and a far less extravagant time. Imagine, there were no i-Pods, no computers, no cell phones, no video games, no big screen TVs, no lavish Christmas parties, no expensive gifts, and the unthinkable - no "Black Friday." How could they have possibly survived? Yet, those memories of Swanson's, as well as Christmas memories for those of us that may recall some of those somewhat "simpler" times from the past, are very likely indelibly etched in our minds as being remarkably happy and memorable.



THE LAKE

CLAUDE N.
SWANSON

Breezes
WHISPER...