

Christmases past recall times of candy, cedar and close calls dressed as Santa

By Gordon B. Seavey

Much of the festivities at Christmastime for me as a boy were centered around the Meeting House at the Common. There was no town-wide Christmas party for the young people.

We must recollect that, in area, Westford is the largest town in the county, so its people were living more or less some distance apart in villages. In 1920 the population was under 3,000.

There were the communities of Forge Village, Graniteville, Brookside (Nab) and Parkerville. Excepting the latter, each village had its own community life tied to its churches, schools and community buildings. Few owned autos at that time. Walking distance was about three miles from place to place, so mileage was the factor that kept the communities more or less divided.

Young people from various sections didn't get to know one another until they entered the Academy, as freshmen.

We kids, big and little, looked forward to the Christmas party at the First Parish Church with considerable eagerness. There was the Christmas tree, larger than the one at home, heavily decorated with tinsel, colorful shining balls and an angel and a bright star at the top. Always, there were gifts for all.

In time for the ladies of the Alliance to decorate the tree, we older boys were sent out to search for a suitable one.

Native cedar

We knew just where to search, having spotted just the "right one" some weeks earlier. It was on Ella Hildreth's hillside cow pasture on Boston Road. She was a kindly person who lived elsewhere, but on Hildreth Street at the big bend opposite Prospect Hill. Permission was granted, but we had to promise not to leave the bars down on the pasture gate.

The Sunday school room on the first floor of the meeting house was the locale for the party. There had been a noticeable influx of new members in the school classes, which automatically was a ticket to the festivities.

The program started with a short talk by the minister and the superintendent reminded those newcomers that Christmas is only once a year, but Sunday school goes on — forever!

There was the singing of car-

ols. In anticipation of arrival of Santa touching down on the broad roof of the church, there was a lot of fidgetiness going on, particularly amongst the small fry in the front seats. So far, no Christmas tree, no packages...and no Santa.

Finally there were thumps outside, a brief hush, and then the doors to an adjoining room slid open. There was the humble pasture cedar, fully decorated and hung with many gifts, candy and fruit, in all its glory.

Then there were louder noises and a "Ho, Ho, Ho" from outer space....and like magic, there was Santa. His first question: "Have all you little girls and boys been good children?" The response was a unanimous "Yes!"

Unusual goodies

Each member of the Sunday school, ringers and all, received a red stocking filled with small goodies, gifts and a special treat

cap, capping it all off. So along with the kids, there are whisperings, "Who's playing Santa?" Impersonating Santa is not always an easy job, nor the best.

When in college, this job was assigned to me. It meant donning a home-made suit of red flannel, padded appropriately. The belt was missing, so I used my narrow one. The wig for the white hair and whiskers smelled as if it had just been taken from a parishioner's sheep. One had to suffer through the smell of moth balls.

I usually scored okay playing Santa. One time, however, there could have been a calamity.

There was a cute boy of seven who for certain reasons I shall call Billy. His mother had the reputation (and didn't we kids know it) of being the town scold.

To create conversation, I asked when was he born. He proudly

answered, "on Halloween." Santas should be quick with the comebacks, so I stated, "Some old witch must have brought you."

I caught my breath. I looked over the audience. There, sitting in the fourth row, was Billy's mother. Santa shivered for the moment that never came. The angels must have been listening, too, for they were on my side. They could have whispered in her ear, for if my remark ever struck home, she missed it.

It was so long ago, perhaps 70 years, that this double-meaning slip-of-the-tongue occurred. I haven't worn a red costume with smelly whiskers since.

Merry Christmas Billy wherever you are!

Gordon Seavey was one of the active members in the First Parish Church and as a boy swept the floors, rang the bell for services, wound the steeple clock and was one of the last of a breed, the organ blow boy.

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in the toe, an orange. Hanging also from the tree were paper cornucopias filled with hard candies, something the youngsters couldn't find in the candy case in the two nearby grocery stores.

My father, Homer Seavey, was a foreman in a confectionery plant in Boston. He had gathered these goodies during the week and brought them out by train. We met him when the little street car, grinding up from Brookside, reached our house at the foot of the Common.

These sweets were supposedly hidden until the proper time, but we kids usually found the hiding place. We admired...but did not taste. This candy was a marvelous assortment of colors, designs and shapes. And one could suck on them for a long time.

Playing Santa

Even the grown-ups want to know who is hiding behind a big, red belly, a head of white hair and beard and the stocking



Courtesy of June B. Kennedy

A greeting card from the 1890s depicts Saint Nicholas without his familiar, more colorful garb, offering fruit to children he encounters on a snowy walk near the church.