

Christmases past, when sleds were king

By June W. Kennedy
Staff correspondent

This is the last in a series of recollections of Westford Christmases past by residents who grew up in a simpler time.

When the Wilder boys — Arnold, George and Bernard — came to live at the farmhouse opposite the Parkerville Schoolhouse, Bernard, the youngest, was six years old. Now in his retirement years, he graphically brings to life a sampling of the Christmas holiday at the Wilder household.

The boys would head down to the Wilder pasture — down the lane opposite the schoolhouse and towards "Texas" into the blueberry patch to cut the Christmas tree. A pine was a "no-no" because it didn't smell like Christmas.

The tree was trimmed before Christmas with roping and the usual balls. It was a family affair and mother supervised. The tree was left up 'til New Year's.

Although it was the custom to have real candles in holders on the tree, their mother never allowed the candles on their tree to be lit. (Remember, electricity didn't come to Parker Village 'til the late 20s.)

However, on Christmas Eve a real candle was placed and lighted in every window in this old rambling farmhouse. (It had "skatey-eight" windows, Bernard's own words.)

Every imaginable way was used to hold those candles in place. The three brothers were "on patrol" to keep checking the windows to make sure no curtain had caught fire, etc. It was one of the highlights of the season.

Bernard doesn't recall the custom of hanging the Christmas stocking at this home. A gift under the tree was always something useful like boots, a new coat or overshoes. His mother always gave a box of fudge to "take the edge off."

He doesn't recall toys as the principal gift. It was primarily clothing. Except one year he got a much-wanted sled. The Nesmith brothers and his own brothers had sleds.

Mr. McIntosh in Parker Village made a slide from his house to the brook. The Succo children had Flexible Flyers — the best. Brother Arnold had a Speedway (almost as good).

Under the Christmas tree for Bernard one year was "Champion" sled — but a champion it was not! No matter what was done to the runners, Bernard was the last one down the hill. He does recall his big collie dog pulling him in the sled.

On Christmas day the children

arrived the week before Christmas from relatives in the old country — Krakow, Poland.

The heading on the letter carried the blessing: "Let it be for the glory of Jesus Christ forever and ever — Amen." As a youngster he memorized it, which pleased his own parents.

Accompanying the letter across the waters was a round loaf of bread filled with raisins. It was to them a holy communion among the

were hung on a nail and a shelf behind the stove. An orange, maybe an apple, dark black coal (just a tradition here) — walnuts and maybe 2¢, 3¢ or 5¢ would be found in the stocking on Christmas morning.

Under the tree there would be a present — maybe a brand new sled. (One Christmas Chester remembers sledding down Pond Street, and halfway down the hill the runners buckled.)

Real wax candles were put on the tree. When they were burned down half way, they had to blow them out. (A bucket of water was kept close by!) Christmas balls decorated the tree also. Chester doesn't recall card sending as an early tradition in his family.

Christmas dinner was a big meal. His mother made a delicate liquidy mushroom soup from the mushrooms they'd harvest around Westford in September. They would dry them for a few months. Being close to Forge Pond, his brother would go fishing, so the family had fresh fish soup.

Chester still remembers that his mother made two dishes of jello — one strawberry and one orange. Father made stuffed fresh shoulder and dressing. The dressing, full of herbs, tasted even better than the shoulder. Apple pies and donuts as big as tennis balls, without holes and a pretty rusty color topped off the menu.

Chester says his father worked as a fireman for the Abbot Worsted Company. He'd work on Christmas night as a watchman checking every hour to see that there were no fires. For this he'd receive an extra \$5.

Although outside decorations weren't common, there was a Christmas party at school. He remembers one year bringing in a pine tree. There was an orange and mixed candies for all the students. One year Chester wanted a box of crayons — yellow, blue and red — and that's just what he got. He figures the teacher had a role in that.

At Sunday School he'd also receive a box of candy. Midnight Mass at St. Catherine's was also a part of Chester's Christmas celebration.



Antique card courtesy June W. Kennedy

An antique greeting card declares "Ring Happy Bells!" and states: "Ring out the old, ring in the new. Ring happy bells, across the snow. The year is going, let him go. Ring out the false ring in the true. (Tennyson) With many New Year's Greetings."

would be found skating on the pond across from the present Emmet home on Concord Road or sledding.

Chester Sienkiewicz

Chester Sienkiewicz has lived at his Pond Street home for the entire 69 years of his life. He recalls the annual Christmas letter which

generations. Chester's mother would take out a special plate on Christmas Eve and each family member would break off a portion before partaking of the bread.

The children didn't see the tree until Christmas. It was decorated by his mother and father. The stockings — big wooden ones —