

# Memories of Christmas past

By June W. Kennedy

Special to the Eagle

One of the special joys for me at the Christmas season is remembering talks with old-timers and life-long residents of Westford to catch a glimpse of how Christmas was celebrated in this rural town during the years spanning the twentieth century's first decade through the early 1950s. The true "spirit of Christmas" rings forth through their memories. Shining so brightly are those keys to the Yuletide — family, homespun cheer, simplicity, church, and that special ingredient, magic. Let me share with you.

## Veronica Sullivan

The late Veronica Sullivan moved to Graniteville from England when she was 7 years old. She recalled that Christmas was not big and fancy like today. An apple or an orange and some hard candy would be found in the Christmas stocking and under the tree there would be a special gift, maybe a doll. She remembered her mother's apple pies for Christmas dinner.

Veronica came from a big family and some of her siblings worked at area mills and lived away from home. But they came home for the holidays. That, itself, was a big family

treat!

Like others in the community, Veronica recalled that Abbot Worsted Company was good to its employees at the holiday season. Abbot Worsted saw to it that children had gifts at school.

During her married years in Forge Village, she and her husband trimmed the tree on Christmas Eve. Her husband would bring their little daughter downstairs on Christmas morning to see the bright ornaments on the tree that Santa had left. A treasure or two would be found in the stocking and, of course, a few gifts beneath the tree.

The Christmas shopping was done in Lowell at Pollard's, Grant's, Cherry & Webb or Bon Marche. One could take a trolley all the way to Lowell with only one changeover. It was 14 cents from Forge Village to North Chelmsford and 5 cents from North Chelmsford right into Lowell.

Veronica voiced the sentiments of others when she exclaimed, "Christmas was simple. Maybe we were better off."

## The Wilder boys

When the Wilder boys, Arnold and the late George and Bernard, came to live at the farmhouse opposite the Parkerville Schoolhouse in 1923,

Bernard, the youngest, was 6 years old. Bernard graphically brought to life a sampling of Christmas cheer at the Wilder household.

The boys would head to the Wilder pasture — down the lane opposite the schoolhouse toward "Texas" and past 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 trees to be lit. (Electricity didn't come to Parker Village 'til later in the 1920s.)

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. It was one of the highlights of the season.

Bernard didn't recall the custom of hanging the Christmas stocking at his 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 didn'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 a "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 did recall his big collie dog pulling him in the sled.

On Christmas day the children would be found skating on the pond across from the Emmet home on Concord Road, or sledding.

## Ruth Nesmith Hall

The late Ruth Nesmith Hall grew up on the Nesmith farm



Courtesy photos

## Early 20th-century Christmas cards.

down on Concord Road in the Parker Village section of town. She, like her brothers Linwood and Norman and sisters Bertha, Marian, and Elizabeth, attended the Parkerville Schoolhouse and remembered that on the last day of school before Christmas vacation there was a Christmas party with an exchange of presents. In 1919, Elizabeth received the gift of a china dog from her classmate Jennie Seifer; in 2006, she donated this dog to the Friends of the Parkerville Schoolhouse. Elizabeth is the last living alumna of the school.

A beautiful tree was brought in by the janitor or older students and placed on the platform for the season. All the children had a hand in decorating the tree. In school the students made snowflakes, paper chains and strings of popcorn for decorations.

For the party a note was sent home to the parents requesting cookies. There was a lot of carol singing and a program where everybody sang

or spoke a recitation. Parents, of course, were invited to attend.

Ruth recollected going up to the Congregational Church (now Parish Center for the Arts) on Christmas Eve for a pageant. She vividly recalled how Billy Prescott's mother always dressed him up "so cute" and what a great entertainer he was!

Cocoa, cookies and a little gift of candy or a book were given to each child in the church. Her mother and father trimmed the home tree after the children had gone to bed. She supposed it came off the wood lot on the farm.

The children made a few of the ornaments, but some were bought. Like many of us, Ruth reminisced about seeing an "old favorite" on the tree each season. Seeing the tree for the first time on a Christmas morning was always a big thrill.

Although Ruth didn't recall hanging stockings, she and her siblings would awaken bright and early at 4:30 a.m. to see what Santa had left. It was the custom in this household to

open the gifts the minute the family arose.

Etched in Ruth's mind as a special gift was a little washing machine for doll clothes that she received in 1918 when she was seven. Santa left books, too. "Black Beauty" and "Little Women" were favorites.

Father Nesmith had to have his annual chicken pie for Christmas breakfast. For the dinner, roasted rooster from the farm and steamed plum pudding were on the menu.

Having the family all together was greatly cherished at this season. Sister Bertha worked and lived in Boston, but came home for the holiday. The tree was traditionally taken down on New Year's Day.

Christmas blessings and Happy Holidays to all!

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections of Days Gone By," a book of oral interviews and photos. Copies are available from the author at 692-8924, the Westford Museum, Holly Hill Framing, or [www.Authorhouse.com](http://www.Authorhouse.com).

