

# Memories of old-fashioned Christmases

By June W. Kennedy  
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*This is the first of a two-part series of interviews with residents who can recall Christmases in a simpler time.*

One of the special joys for me this Christmas season of 1989 was talking 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 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, homemade, simplicity and that special ingredient of magic. Let me share with you:

Veronica Sullivan moved to Graniteville from England when she was seven years old. Now in her eighties, 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 Co. 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 change-over. It was 14¢ from Forge Village to North Chelmsford and 5¢ from North Chelmsford right into Lowell.

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

## Frank Jarvis

Frank Jarvis has spent all of his 80-plus years on the family farm in the south part of town. He attended the Parkerville Schoolhouse from 1912 to 1920.

Frank recalled that the older boys were allowed to go search for a Christmas tree for the schoolhouse. Neighbors were always glad to share a tree. About four to six boys would cut one, drag it to the schoolhouse and set it up on the teacher's platform. Students brought in some of their family ornaments; they also made strings of cranberries and popcorn at school.

A Christmas party was held each year on the final day before the holiday recess. School children wore their best bib and tucker. Proud parents came with broad smiles to watch their offspring rush up to the left side of the stove to recite and then rush back to their seat.

Frank's most memorable recitation at school was "Twas the Night Before Christmas" — and he can still recite it! There was choral singing with duets of Christmas songs and carols.

Everyone drew a name for a gift exchange. He said it was something useful like a writing tablet

or pencil, etc. He didn't recall having refreshments, but commented that when the program was over, everyone was eager to head home. Often it was a mile or two and most folk wanted to get home before dark.

Frank said the long stockings that young boys wore tucked into their knickers were just perfect for the Christmas stocking. In it would be placed nuts, dates, a small present or two, and an orange. He remarked that oranges were a luxury in those days of the teens and early 20s. One couldn't find them in the market after the New Year, and they didn't reappear until the fall season.

Presents weren't gaudily wrapped, but appeared wrapped in brown paper. There were no fancy name tags. One's name was written right on the wrapper.

Gifts, he recalled, were useable like stockings, gloves or maybe a blouse. (In those days shirts had no tails, but sported an elasticized waist and were called blouses.)

One might receive three or four gifts. The prized gift of his youth when 12 or 13 was a Flexible Flyer sled — a long one about four feet.



Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

A turn-of-the century greeting card uses what now would be a spring theme — a basket of violets — to illustrate "A Merry Christmas/Bright and Gay."

It was the only one in the neighborhood. He was proud to own that sled.

The Jarvise's didn't have a Christmas tree at their home except in the year of 1896. It was the occasion of his parents' twenty-first wedding anniversary which was close to Christmas. A supper was held and relatives arrived in horse-drawn sleighs. The tree was lit with wax candles (There was no electricity in this house 'til 1933.)

However, Frank cherished memories of going to Grandfather Blaisdell's, also in the south part of town (on the South Chelmsford Road) for Christmas dinner. Grandfather and Grandmother Blaisdell had a tree decorated with popcorn and cranberries and a few decorated glass balls from F.W. Woolworth's.

The popcorn, he remembered, was repacked; the cranberries had to be strung each year. The delicate glass balls were carefully packed away each year. Frank remembered not just the silver tinsel on the tree, but the special silver tinsel with the red flecks that was so eye-catching.

Weather permitting, cousins would arrive by sleigh or buggy, depending on the conditions. Two aunts would journey out from Waltham by train to West Concord Depot and on to the South Chelmsford Station where family members would meet them in a horse-drawn vehicle. At about age eight, Frank remembered taking

the train with his parents at Christmas time to Waltham to visit these same aunts. It was the wait of 1½ to two hours at the Concord Depot, with very little heat, that left an indelible imprint on his memory of that day.

Dinner at the Blaisdell homestead consisted of many home-grown vegetables, mashed potatoes, squash, mince and apple pies. Grandfather always had to have his Christmas goose and a fresh roasted pig raised by himself. He'd have it slaughtered around the fifteenth of December by Alex Fisher. It probably weighed 135 to 140 pounds.

Frank noted that there was no extra spending money. Christmas cards were like postcards, without envelopes. He did recall greetings from friends and relatives. He claimed, "Christmas was much nicer then. It's too commercial now."

## Ruth Nesmith Hall

Ruth Nesmith Hall grew up on the Nesmith farm down on Concord Road in the Parker Village section of town. She, like her brothers Linwood and Norman and sisters Bertha, Marjorie, Elizabeth, attended the Parkerville Schoolhouse and remembered that on the last day of school before the Christmas vacation, there was a Christmas party with an exchange of presents.

A beautiful tree was brought in by the janitor 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 lots 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 First Parish Hall on Lincoln Street) 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 was given to each child at the church. Her mother and father trimmed the home tree after the children had gone to bed. She supposed it came off the woodlot 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 in 1918 when she was seven was a little washing machine for doll clothes. Santa left good 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 the highlights.

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 blessing to all!

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident, author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical vignettes and photos.