

HOLIDAY MEMORIES

Cherished Childhood Christmas Memories

Michael Knapp
Lovin' English



Bronner's Christmas specialty store, Frankenmuth, Michigan

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Christmas is a special time of the year, especially for those of us who are blessed with pleasant childhood memories of the holiday. My Christmas memories are a cherished treasure.

The classic song, *I'm dreaming of a white Christmas*, is a perfect picture of Christmas in Michigan, the state in the USA where I grew up. Every December, my parents would take me and my two brothers for a ride through the countryside and into town to gaze at the amazing holiday displays in people's lawns and on the city streets. The colorful lights, against a snowy white backdrop, glimmered brightly into the darkness of the night. After an hour or so in the car, we'd return home to our own Christmas tree, where we would sit, staring at the colorfully wrapped gifts piled under it, trying to guess what was inside, while eagerly awaiting Christmas morning when we could rip them open. The wait was always accompanied by glittery Christmas snow, just outside the window.



Christmas displays light up the front lawn of a home in Michigan
Don Reid, Coldwater Daily Reporter,
<http://www.thedailyreporter.com/photos?start=2>

Our nostalgic family tradition, which consisted of a variety of exciting Christmas celebrations, was similar to that of many other Americans. Besides a small gift exchange at school just before Christmas break, we would receive another gift from our Sunday school teacher at

Church. Although I wasn't a Christian at that time, my grandma always took us to church when we were little, which is probably where I learned to appreciate Christmas music. These small gifts were only the beginning of a series of celebrations.

With our parents and two sets of grandparents, we enjoyed three Christmas get-togethers every year. My mom's parents were the most flexible, hosting their five kids and lots of grandchildren (my cousins). Sometimes this event took place Christmas Eve, sometimes Christmas night, and other years shortly after Christmas, occasionally as late as New Year's Day. Grandma and Grandpa Barnes lived on a large farm, where we could play in the snow, ride snowmobiles, and play in the hay loft of their enormous barn, making for a memorable time with my relatives.

Christmas morning was always a special time for just the five of us: Dad, Mom, me and my two younger brothers. It all started the night before when we left cookies and milk on the table for "Santa Clause." At an early age, we realized it was our parents who actually enjoyed these treats. The anticipation of the Christmas



Snow-covered Michigan roof

morning excitement always made falling asleep difficult.

There were two waves of gifts on Christmas morning. The first group, we were always told, came from Santa Clause. These were always toys that were too difficult to wrap, so as soon as we three boys rushed out of our bedrooms to the living room, we would see them carefully positioned on the floor around the colorfully lit Christmas tree. The “Santa Clause” part also included dumping the sweets and nuts from our Christmas stockings. In the excitement, we never noticed dad filming, but for years to come, we watched videos of three boys jumping with joy at the site of huge “Santa” gifts and stockings being emptied into large bowls.

The second phase started right after breakfast. This was the part where we opened the presents that were wrapped, the ones we knew came from Mom and Dad. From a very young age, we learned to always say “thank you” for gifts we received, and to actively participate in the gift exchange by buying something for our parents. When we were too little to actually do our own shopping, Dad would show us a pile of things he had bought for Mom, and allow each of us boys to choose one that would be “from us” for Mom. The morning gift exchange would usually last till mid-morning, followed by a time of trying on new clothes and playing with new toys. When gifts included outdoor items, such as sleds, new boots, or sports equipment, we would spend the late morning hours playing out in the snow. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad worked in the kitchen, preparing dishes to take to Grandma and Grandpa’s house for the next Christmas gathering.

Just before noon, when the novelty of new toys had already started wearing off, it was time to for the short one-mile ride to my paternal grandparents. As our car approached their home, down the snow-covered country road, we could see sparkling lights on their Christmas tree, beautifully displayed in the front window. We all helped carry dishes and gifts in through the back door, dropped off the food in Grandma’s kitchen, and rushed to the tree in the living room, where we would carefully lay our gifts for grandma and grandpa, and then try to figure out which gifts, in the huge pile, were ours.

Grandma and Grandpa sat at opposite ends of the long oak wood table, while my parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, cousins, and I sat elbow to elbow along the two sides. Grandma always started the meal off by leading us in a prayer, and then everything; meat, potatoes, vegetables and other dishes, were passed around the table. By the end of this noon Christmas dinner, we were all so stuffed we thought we couldn’t eat another bite, but when Grandma brought out homemade cake, fruit pies, and Christmas cookies, our stomachs magically made room to start eating again.



Rural Michigan mail boxes covered with snow

After dinner it was time to tear open the presents under the tree. Everyone found a comfortable place to sit around the perimeter of the living room on couches and chairs. Whoever was chosen to “play Santa” – Grandma or one of us kids – would read the name tags on each of the gifts under the tree, and then hand them out to the recipients. It seemed like just minutes until it was all over and the room was filled with torn up pieces of wrapping paper. There was always a lot of saying “thank you” and after the adults talked for a while, we carried our new clothes and toys out to the car and rode back down the snowy road to our home, where we spent the rest of the day playing.

I grew up, moved away for study and work, and eventually left for my long-term life in China, but these precious childhood Christmas memories are so fresh that they seem like just yesterday. Now, my wife and I are raising our children in China, and even though they cannot spend the holiday with their paternal grandparents back in Michigan, we are creating new Christmas traditions and memories that I hope our kids will grow up to cherish as much as I cherish my own Christmas memories. Beijing doesn't always give us a snowy white Christmas, and there are no country roads leading to Grandma and Grandpa's farm house, but our apartment is decked out for the holidays, including a Christmas tree with sparkling lights, and a pile of gifts under the tree. I still think about Michigan, but sitting in front of the tree in our Beijing living room thinking about the Christ of Christmas and the excitement we are all going to experience Christmas morning tearing open those presents, hugging each other, and giving thanks, I have a deep sense of contentment just knowing my children will grow up with unforgettable holiday memories.



Our Beijing Christmas tree, with Chinese Grandma



It may not be the snow-covered country roads of Michigan, but China's shopping malls, all decked out for the holiday, help to make this country a great place to create Christmas memories.



Children joyfully singing lively Christmas songs at a Sunday morning church service at Beijing International Christian Fellowship, creating life-long holiday memories.