

The wonder of Christmas past: a recollection from childhood

By ELIZABETH HOWARD
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

LITTLETON—The glorious sound of Christmas music fills the room. The tree, delivered from Lexington Avenue, is grand. Park Avenue sparkles with lighted trees all the way up and down the street. Central Park is a wonderland after a pure white winter snow. Joyful it is. Christmas present.

Yet, not one of us can escape the spirit of Christmas past who visits, stirring our memories and traveling with us into the forgotten land of our childhood. "Space, like time," wrote Thomas Mann, "engenders forgetfulness: but it does so by setting us bodily free from our surroundings, and giving us back our primitive, unattached state."

Enchanting were our Littleton Christmases. They began when our house was magically transformed, soon after Thanksgiving, with boughs of greens and holly. We were fascinated that a large rectangular mirror could become a skating rink with the addition of rolled cotton batting and a few small antique figures. Or that a white antique covered dish could assume such an elegant air when tied with satin ribbon and Christmas balls. Wreaths were made of dried things gathered during autumn hikes and the sweet odors of baking cookies, rolls, and fruit cakes seemed to endlessly be wafting through the house.

When it was time to put up a tree, we piled into the car and drove out into the woods, hiking through the snow until, with a nod from my mother, a tree was selected. My father would caution us to stand back, and with a wave of his gloved hands he would raise his ax to cut down the tree. The decorating, on another day, was done in front of a roaring fire with lots of cookies and hot chocolate.

The official start of the season was the festive arrival of Santa Claus at MacLeod's Department Store. For us, it was the biggest department store we had ever visited and we marveled, as tiny people, at the clothing, china and toys. Santa sat in a large chair and we waited patiently until it was our turn to sit on his lap. How we loved to tell him what we wanted for Christmas and waited as he knowingly nodded his approval. We left with a small round pin fastened to our coats with a painted Santa and the words: "I visited Santa at MacLeod's."

There were programs at school and pageants at church. We sang in

the choir, and all of us, during our childhood, played the role of Mary, Joseph or angels. We put the straw in the manger and learned about incense, frankincense and myrrh. We carried lighted candles out into the cold, black night after church and always glanced up to find the stars.

Santa Claus and Mrs. [Evelyn] Simmonds would knock on the door bearing a plate of Christmas cookies. There were angels, reindeer and snowmen, each one perfectly decorated with little silver balls and colored frosting. Museum miniatures. We carefully kept a few aside to leave for Santa, along with carrots for the reindeer. Not one of us ever heard reindeer hoofs on the roof, as hard as we tried.

On Christmas morning, instructed to stay in bed, or at least out of the living room until all the family was awake, we would rush down the stairs together to look at what had been left under the tree. There were dolls and drum sets, a robot machine that walked, and a long, gray mechanical submarine. The room was soon filled with paper and squeals of marvel and delight.

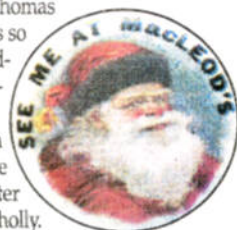
This November, after almost more than 30 years, I was in Littleton again for the Christmas parade: awed by the majesty of the mountains driving through Franconia Notch, chilled by the frigid cold, warmed by the feeling of friendship, marveling at how much has changed, and at the same time remained the same. As if the mountains have served as a protector of this place.

There is sorrow, as there must be, that innocence and wonder have been lost. There is joy, in the recognition that it is love that binds a family forever. There is awe, at the true beauty found in nature. There is the ever-present hope that people can live in peace.

*O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie
Above the deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
Yet in the dark streets shines, the everlasting light;
The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Elizabeth Howard grew up in Littleton with her parents, Ellis and Elizabeth Howard, and her three brothers, David, Peter and James.

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This Christmas card dating to 1925 was sent to the Apthorp Post Office in Littleton,



A Christmas postcard from 1925 was sent to Littleton's Frances Heald on Grove Street from a friend in New York.

