

Cork County Council *and, the* Cork County Age Friendly Programme *present*

Memories of a Real Cork Christmas

A collection of cherished
Christmas memories
and beloved traditions
from members of the
**Cork County Older
Persons Council**



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Memories of a Real Cork Christmas

Under the umbrella of Cork County Council's 'A Real Cork Christmas' initiative, Cork County Age Friendly Programme invited members of Cork County Older Persons Council to send their stories of Christmas Traditions and Childhood memories of Christmas.

We received wonderful stories from lovely people. We decided to make a collection of these stories in print and plan to produce them in a limited edition book format in the New Year - a fitting tribute of appreciation to all of the participants .

A copy of this booklet will be stored in the County Library Local Studies department and it will also be available to borrow in all Cork County Council Library and Arts Service branches. And of course, the contributors will get their own special copy to treasure. Copies of the book will also be presented to our Cork County Council Chief Executive, our Mayor and Divisional Managers in each region as well as to members of the Older People's Council Executive.

December 2020

A Real Cork Christmas in Times Past by Esther (Fermoy)

I was born in India of Irish parents, later lived in South Africa for five years, England for two years, and Dublin for many years before coming to Cork, which has been my home for thirty years.

One Christmas in Fermoy was a strange time, as there was a huge storm with high winds, and a tree was blown across the drive and jammed the main gate so we were trapped. There was no telephone line and a shortage of water as the pump was damaged, and no electricity. At least we had a battery for the radio. My husband and I were on our own, as my daughter Sarah and my granddaughter Fay aged four were staying in Cork. We celebrated Christmas with a roast turkey from the Aga, joined by our two loving black Labradors.

Another Christmas where we now live in Mitchelstown has a much happier memory. My daughter and granddaughter were with us, and we enjoyed the special service in our local chapel.

We live in Kingston College and had our neighbours in for mulled wine and mince pies. I have happy childhood memories of hanging a stocking from the bedpost and waking on Christmas morning to find it filled with lots of exciting gifts.

I loved spending Christmas with my aunt Sheila in her caravan called 'The Ark' because various animals joined her there. On Christmas Eve we made little presents, small notebooks made from old Christmas cards, the cover illustrated by Sheila with pictures of cats or dogs, or her favourite robin which fed from her hand. We prepared little presents for her pets too, a ball of fluffy angora wool for her cat, a large marrow bone scrubbed and polished like ivory and tied with a red ribbon for her dog Bruno. I woke on Christmas Day to feel Bruno's damp nose against my cheek, and the sound of local children singing carols as they gathered outside The Ark.

That special Christmas we started the day with a glass of Sheila's home brewed blackberry wine, hot toast dripping with honey, and a warm hug. Another hug, and as her cat purred contentedly, we exchanged presents amidst laughter and excited chatter. At the end of the day we went to bed and so, with the logs still cracking in the iron stove, I fell asleep to the sound of the cat purring in the background, and my patchwork doll painstakingly made by Sheila clutched in my arm.

Another childhood memory of Christmas was when my black cat Jezebel crept into my room and jumped onto my bed. I loved these nightly visits from my pet and I pulled back the sheet to make a cosy resting place for my furry friend. Soon we were dozing contentedly. In the morning, I was surprised to hear soft sweet meow sounds. I lifted my arm sleepily and was so surprised to see what looked like two wet mice that Jezebel was licking. Then it slowly dawned on me that these were newborn kittens, and Jezebel had just given birth. How exciting- and what a lovely surprise Christmas present!

Christmas in the Early 50s

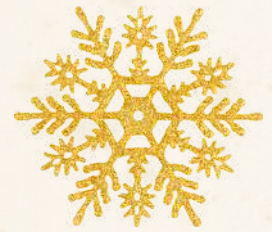
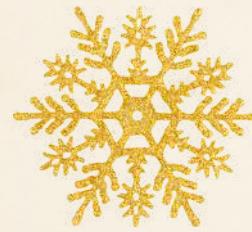
by Liz (Mitchelstown)

I grew up on a small farm just a 10 minute walk from Mitchelstown, also known as 'the home of good cheese'.

Christmas in our home was magical and very revered. I can remember walking home from school and once I reached the front door, the smell of homemade baking and dinner ready on the table will stay with me forever. I had fantastic parents, my Mam was a fantastic homemaker while Dad worked on the farm.

Before we had electricity, I can remember the winter evenings when Mam would light the tilly lamp that created a beautiful glow around the parlour, showing off the Sacred Heart picture and a large framed photo of President Kennedy. The rosary was recited every evening, and we dared not talk or smile until the last prayer was said.

Christmas wasn't spoken about until after the 8th December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Once we celebrated that day by going to early Mass and afterwards going home to enjoy a lovely cooked breakfast of sausages, homemade black pudding, and fresh eggs provided by the hens- who were very busy running around the barn, followed by



a cock who often gave me a fine peck in the leg. We had our own potatoes and vegetables, and every November we killed a pig, but I must admit the neighbours got more of the pig than we did.

A big clean-up of the house had to be done first. Floors had to be scrubbed, walls painted, and windows cleaned. Once all that was done we were ready for Christmas. Remembering we were very young, but we had to do the chores. The first job was to collect holly, and this was placed on every picture that was hung on the wall. Our Christmas decorations were used from one Christmas to another, so when Christmas was over, they were placed in a cardboard box and left in the attic for the next year. These were put on walls, pictures, and of course on the Christmas tree (no electricity, no lights).

We had a beautiful crib placed on the parlour window that was made out of timber. We collected straw for around the floor of the crib and moss for the roof to make it look real. That time we had no electricity, so a candle was placed near the crib that reflected on the holy statues of Our Lady, St Joseph, and the three Wise Men, and not forgetting the sheep, the cow and the donkey who kept the baby Jesus warm. The baby Jesus wasn't placed in the manger until Christmas morning, and I can remember so well Mam placing baby Jesus there.

I used to help Mam with the grocery shopping. She made the Christmas cakes and the Christmas pudding, and this was done the first week in December. We reared our own turkeys, and Mam made sure they were well fattened for our Christmas dinner.

I was very young when I remembered my mam writing the Christmas cards. We had an aunt in America, and she was always first on the list so she would receive the card on time. There were family members and friends whom I know now that didn't contact us for years, but yet Mam insisted they get a card. I was always told it's traditional, so it must be done. The cards we received were put hanging over the fireplace on a string. I can remember the string falling down with the weight of the cards and whoever was near it at the time got the blame.

Christmas week was a very busy week- remember now, we still had no electricity. I remember Mam killing the turkey and plucking the feathers and drying them all out to make a lovely soft pillow. The turkey with her legs tied together was hung at the back of the door. I was scared to go out that door in case the turkey would come back to life.

We didn't get a choice of what we wanted for Christmas, only we were thankful for what we got. Christmas morning we were all up bright and early and our Christmas presents were on the bottom of the bed where Santa left them. We believed in Santa right up to our 10th birthday. It was so magical and exciting with not a care in the world. We had a battery operated radio and the Christmas carols brightened up the whole house, with everyone joining in the sing song.

Christmas Day arrived- presents opened and everyone happy, it was time to go to early Mass. Dinner was simmering on the Aga cooker, and the aroma that filled the house will stay with me forever. We had a special tablecloth that only came out on Christmas Day, as well as the china cups and saucers, plates and dinner plates, and a beautiful vase of flowers that adorned the table. A sight to behold. After dinner we played cards for a while, and then played some board games that Santa gave us. Later we all went for a stroll up the road to say hello to the neighbours.

To me personally, Christmas in the 50s was so special. We were so innocent, we thanked God for what we had and enjoyed every moment of it. We had no electricity, no television, no mobile phones, no landline phones, no computers. But one thing for sure, we had great neighbours- we shared what we had, great community spirit, we were happy and contented.



**Memories of Christmas
by Eleanor (Fermoy)**

One of my strongest memories of Christmas (back in the fifties) was going to 7am Mass, Christmas morning (no new or old time then). When we came out it was very dark, and the sky was full of stars. I came to Mass with my Mam, my Dad stayed at home minding my other siblings.

We had an Aga cooker- he would have a big fry on and ready for all of us, I will always remember the smell, we didn't get that kind of breakfast very often in those days. I could go on and on telling stories about those days, but I'm sure other people will have other stories to tell you.

Happy Christmas, thank you and God Bless.



**Christmas Memories
by Joan (Mitchelstown)**

Looking back over Christmases gone by, the best ones were when Sarah, our only child, was small. She was born on September 20th 1993, so she was three months old that first Christmas. I bought her a lot of toys, getting great pleasure out of choosing stuff for my daughter.

The following year, Sarah was 15 months old at Christmas. She hadn't yet started to walk, but she was talking non-stop. She walked first for my childminder's son Edmund. I remember getting 'Father Christmas', the video by Raymond Briggs, and the family got many hours of enjoyment watching that video.

When Sarah was 10 years old, in February we were driving into town, with Sarah in the back seat of the car. She piped up: "Mammy, I know". "What do you know Sarah?" "About Santa". "What do you know about Santa, Sarah?" "That he doesn't exist!" The magic was gone forever.

**Some Christmas Memories Growing Up
on a Farm in North Wexford**
by Carmel

My parents always reared a flock of turkeys. On about the 8th of December, the first of the turkeys were sold to butchers in Arklow & around so many other places. As a young girl, we had to help pluck them out in a grove beside the farmhouse & the feathers were left drop onto dust bags for easy collection.

One memory stands out- a neighbour asked my mother for a turkey hen, most of the hens were from 22-26 lbs. weight and the cocks from 28-32 lbs. weight, free range. I was given the turkey to bring on the bicycle to the neighbour for 19 shillings and she gave me pennies- little 3 penny bits & 6 penny bits, loose, to pay for the turkey. It was so hard to carry the money in my hand on the bicycle.

My mother mixed the pudding in the big bowl- we all got to stir it. She then put it into a white bag and onto a stick, and put it in a big black pot over the open fire for hours. It was then taken out & hung up near the chimney to mature.

Delicious- we all loved it!



The paper decorations, holly & balloons went up on Christmas Eve. We were so excited for Santa coming, hanging up our stockings on the hooks beside the chimney. Christmas morning we were up very early to see what Santa brought. We then walked in the snow to Mass. Three Masses were said on Christmas morning, one after the other- we had to do the full lot of them, then walk home- over two miles. We threw snowballs at each other, frozen with the cold- no heat then in the church.

A huge fry up of homemade black & white pudding, sausages, rashers & the free range eggs from our fowl. My daddy always killed a pig in November, we had the hams up the chimney, curing & being smoked. My father would have made the puddings and sausages- they were all on sticks, also hanging up near the open fire. Beautiful taste.

Christmas dinner was served about 1pm. We all then played games, cards, Ludo, tiddlewinks, snakes & ladders, draughts & so many other games, as the snow was too deep to be outside.

I could write ten times about so many memories of Christmas. The Rosary was said before we went to bed.

Carmel now lives in Youghal

Christmas Traditions in Ovens by Rose

Christmas was very much a religious feast- the story of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. We were in the church choir, and practiced for weeks beforehand. Miss O'Sullivan, one of our teachers, played the organ and trained the choir. We learned carols like 'Away In A Manger', 'Hark The Herald Angels Sing', 'Once In Royal David's City', and 'Adeste Fidelus'. We sang beautifully on Christmas morning at 1st Mass!

I was eight years old when the war ended in 1945, so there were lots of scarcities. We didn't have fruit- oranges, bananas, grapes, never saw them as a child. Christmas Day Dinner was a big event. We always had goose and, I presume, ham. Goose was always stuffed with potatoes- not breadcrumbs.

There were two bachelor gentlemen living near who always had Christmas dinner with us. What did we drink- water. My father and the two guests probably had whiskey. My mother never drank alcohol.



We usually got new dresses for Christmas, and of course Santa came, bringing what we had asked for- dolls, prams, books, board games. That's what we did in the afternoon- played Snakes & Ladders, Ludo etc. We had Thompsons Christmas Cake, and homemade Christmas pudding. We also had a light fruit cake which Thompsons made.

A lot of neighbours' sons and daughters were home from England, and as we got older, it was a chance to meet them. There was very little employment in the late forties and early fifties. The men who came home, we called them the 'Dagenham Yanks'- they mostly worked in the Ford motor factory in Dagenham.

Christmas in Cork was a magical place to my childish eyes. The shops were beautifully decorated and glittering. The Munster Arcade, Grants, Roches Stores, The Moderne, and Dowdens were all on Patrick's Street.

St. Stephen's Day was a big sporting day. My father was interested in greyhounds, so we all went coursing to Ballincollig. One year our dog Champ won the 'Fur And Feathers Cup'- great celebrations. Also, on St. Stephen's Day there were many 'scores' placed on the roads. Road bowling was a very popular sport in rural areas, drawing big crowds. Of course we decorated the house with holly, and the paper decorations were carefully kept from year to year.

There was a lot of physical work involved in keeping fires lighting and bringing turf in- our homes were very cold (not that I remember that)! Nobody had central heating- only schools and public places.



Our Christmas Memories

by John & Mary (Glanworth)



In my young days the main tradition was rearing our own Turkeys for Christmas and because I fed them myself, I was promised a new coat and I fed them so well they were nearly overweight.

Another tradition was mid-night Mass, strictly at 12 o'clock. We were very lucky to get a gift from Santa. I remember I got one apple and a story book. When Christmas Day was over we were looking forward to St Stephen's Day, to go hunting the wren to collect some money and goodies. We were given Christmas Cake in nearly every house - we were hardly able to walk home!

My favourite Christmas memory is when the Grand-Children arrived and sharing their Christmas presents with them until they gave up believing in Santa.

One custom in our Community is the Christmas Morning Swim for charity, organised by the Bowling Club for Man, Woman and Child in the River Funshion. Soup and refreshments are served.

Glanworth GAA Club organised a long puck for different Charities, in which ladies, men and children can compete.

One thing we miss during Covid-19 is the social dancing where we meet old and new friends and the Cork Age Friendly Get-Together which is always so enjoyable.... For this year we will keep safe and wish for all the best in 2021.

We will finish with a song and a recipe:

Mary and John's Chocolate Biscuit Cake

- 12oz cooking chocolate
- 1 tin (397g) Condensed Milk
- 1lb rich tea biscuits
- 4oz butter

Break the biscuits.

Melt chocolate and butter and mix together, Add the condensed milk and mix well together.

Add biscuits and ensure they are well coated.

Put in 2lb loaf tin and refrigerate for at least two hours or overnight. If using a microwave to melt chocolate use the low heat until barely melted and melt butter on high for a minute.

Enjoy!

QUE SERA SERA

When I was just a little girl,
I asked my mother, what will I be?
Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?
Here's what she said to me.

All join in chorus

Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be.
The future's not ours to see,
Que sera, sera.
What will be, will be.

When I grew up and fell in love,
I asked my sweetheart, what lies ahead?
Will we have rainbows, day after day?
Here's what my sweetheart said:

Repeat Chorus.... Que Sera Sera

Now I have children of my own,
they asked their mother,
what will they be?
Will I be handsome?
Will I be rich?
I tell them tenderly.

Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be.
The futures not ours to see,
Que sera, sera.
What will be, will be.





Christmas Memories 1940s

by J.J. Duggan (Grenagh)



We lived a long way in from a public road, a real rural area on the Cork-Kerry border. The nearest village was Ballydesmond, on the river Blackwater. There have been a great many changes since then, but we were quite content with our simple lives. We had no car, electricity, running water or television. We had a battery radio and an occasional newspaper so we were not bombarded with ads.

I was the oldest of six children, all born in the 1940's. The Christmas season began during the week before when the shopping was done. The shop where my mother did most business gave her a gift of a "Christmas Box" now almost forgotten by the big supermarkets. They have killed off the smaller family shops so that rural villages have either one shop or none at all !

From today's view point, it seems life was very deprived and empty. It was anything but. Money was scarce for most families so all gifts at Christmas and dinner were treasured more. Our daily diet has without doubt much improved.

We never saw Santa and firmly believed he came down the chimney. We never reasoned how he managed to visit all the children in one night. We hung up our stockings and went to sleep in happy anticipation. Santa brought us apples, sweets, pencils, copy books, colouring books and other non expensive gifts which we treasured. My father said Santa left a footprint up the chimney as he departed. There was a magic feeling about the entire occasion. We were happy to get simple gifts rather than sophisticated ones so our enjoyment was very great.

Early Christmas morning we awoke to see what Santa had given us. We found some of our gifts in our long stockings as we wore short pants then. The rest of Christmas Day was a happy time. Dinner was special and for many years we had a large roast goose rather than a turkey. We kept a flock of geese for the family but in later years bought a turkey from a local farmer. The Christmas season lasted a few more days. As we grew up and helped on the small farm we were expected to work on the sugar beet for processing at the Mallow factory. The holy season was truly over.

Nowadays, Christmas lights and decorations go up in mid November in both town and country. Advertising also starts at this time. This is far too early surely. Is there a danger of becoming bored with the whole extended season or the strings of lights on roofs? It is a wonderful time but is close to saturation now as this article is becoming ...it's time to finish.

Ah, the good old days were best!



My Cork Christmas from Near Macroom

by Chris



Even though I am now over 60 years of age, my two personal experiences of a Cork Christmas only started about 20 years ago when my husband myself and two young sons left the south of England in 1997 to start a new life outside Macroom, in Co.Cork.

We arrived for my 4 year old to start his education at our wonderful local National school. My husband was still working in the UK and the house we moved to had one electrical point and water had to be hand pumped from a well outside into a bucket. We were therefore more than ready for our first family Christmas in Ireland.

Having only been in Ireland for a few months and with my husband still working in the UK till closer to Christmas I decided myself and the two boys could meet the neighbours. They participated by dressing up as Santa and a reindeer and handing out cards. It was a pleasant if uneventful start to what became a family Christmas tradition although in later years the reindeers antlers got lost and neither boy wanted to be an elf.

However the essence of our visits continued when we moved into our renovated home two years later. The boys were older and we had more neighbours to visit. We always finished our visit at our next-door neighbour's house, and I remember the youngest, dressed as Santa and then aged about three years old, falling into the sack in which he had put their Christmas card. As he took the role very seriously, no-one laughed as he was pulled out, proudly clutching their card.

By then we had extended our pre-Christmas visits to the elderly, sick and bereaved as well as our immediate neighbours. I had explained to my children the importance of what they were doing, but the enthusiasm they received, particularly from the housebound, let them know how welcome they were.

Sometimes they played carols over the phone to relatives elsewhere, but arriving in their christmas hats playing carols outside a house in the dark, before being welcomed with good cheer and often mince pies and sweets let them know far better than I could, the importance of what they were achieving in one small part of Cork.

During the peak years of our visits we were sometimes out on the road for 2 or 3 days, playing carols, and delivering satsumas and Christmas cards and finishing in the dark on Christmas Eve. One memorable Christmas the boys presented the entire 'Dead Parrot Sketch' which they had learned off by heart for a school performance. We were also often fortunate enough to be joined by a local girl who assisted with her fiddle.

Sadly these visits ceased about 5 or more years ago when all the musicians were at University leaving myself and my husband to deliver Christmas cards.

Some things are done best by children! And some things are best done by women!

The second Cork tradition started about a year later when someone explained to me about "Women's Christmas". I fell in love with the idea and invited a few women around on January 6th which proved to be the start of an even longer lasting tradition for me.

I now have list of about thirty women who I contact every year to remind them to join together at my home for the crack on 6th January. Sometimes they bring new friends and every year there is a slightly different group of between fifteen and twenty women. Sadly one has passed away and at least three once-regulars now live abroad permanently.

Once I cancelled due to a migraine, although in hindsight I felt I could have stayed in bed and they could have managed themselves! And one stormy night just five brave female souls braved horrendous weather to struggle up to my front door.

And as for the menfolk, dropping off their women, and who have too far to go home, they end up having a chat or playing music with my husband in another room.

I do very little in advance except to prepare a space to collect coats, and provide crockery, cutlery and a little food. I tidy up the swag on the stairs, made from greenery and holly collected many weeks before along the Curra road, made famous by the Cork singer, Ger Wolfe. I turn on the lights on the tree. I watch the decorations glisten in the soft candlelight and I turn on gentle background music.

The dog picks up on the excitement and follows me around. Outside the frontdoor I light candles in bottles, hoping for less wind and rain, as I trail fairy lights around the path and steps. Then the house is given a final cursory sweep and is ready to welcome the women for another 6th January.

If I get changed in time, I watch out for them to arrive, some walking up the hill with torches, giving their arrival away by their giggles as they progress out of the dark night towards the house.

They arrive breathless, flushed and enthusiastic, bearing Christmas left-overs, including cakes biscuits and sweets. A few women bring exquisite beautifully made tasty dishes despite my annual plea that the aim is to relax and do as little as possible for this one night. I don't think some of them can help themselves, but it raises the quality of the fare and is always very popular. I end up with bowls and plates left behind and occasionally I have to wait a full year for them to be reunited with the correct owner.

One of my favourite memories goes back to the very early days when both my boys were very small. I spotted my oldest son peeping through the curtains, when they were supposed to be in bed, and excitedly telling his younger brother: "The Mammies are coming!"

Most people are driving, so tea coffee and fruit juice are more popular than alcohol. Some women work as carers so have to pop in and out during the evening. I often get so involved I forget to take the baked potatoes out of the oven, and other women regularly answer the door when I am distracted.

The parking is always an issue, with cars constantly being reversed and pirouetted around a small space in the dark to let other cars in and out. Fortunately my neighbour provides much needed extra parking at the bottom of our hill. Amazingly over the last twenty years only one woman has put her vehicle in the ditch, though some have come amazingly close, forcing the men folk to offer guidance!

I am touched to hear that some people who met have become very special friends, but still only tend to meet at my house on the 6th. I have heard secrets of sadness and sickness shared, sometimes privately and sometimes in groups, but mostly I enjoy the enthusiastic joyful high-pitched chatter punctuated with laughs. This continues non-stop till about 11pm when the last woman usually leaves. Sometimes a woman stays over and is amazed that the house is back to 'normal' on 7th January.



I have in the past had to do a normal day of teaching on the 7th January so that the magic of the 6th seems a world away, with just the decorations remaining when I get home.

I can't bear the thought of taking down the swag on the stairs or the decorations and tree before the women have been, so Christmas stays till the 7th January and the threatened bad luck has never come.

I feel incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to host this wonderful Cork tradition year after year, and to hold on to such poignant memories.

It will all be different this year, but I will look forward even more to 6th January 2022, when once again women will progress up the hill, giggling and chatting as they make their way between the candles and lights to relax together for their own much deserved Cork Christmas celebration.

A Cork Christmas in the Congo, 1962 by an OPC Member

I was in the Congo for Christmas 1962. A very different Christmas from Cork: heat and sun and Balubas on the warpath. The Villas were decorated, the Crib was constructed, midnight mass and a traditional dinner of turkey and ham.

However, it was a very tense Christmas because on December 30th, we went into action against the Gendarmerie and Mercenaries to take the town of Kipushi and forcing Tshombe to flee and end the independent Katanga. I spent Christmas 1965 in Cyprus with many Cork men, keeping the peace between the Turks and the Greeks. Our area in the NW of the Island was very much like West Cork except for the orange groves. Some Cork City lads were in the remote Observation Posts (OP) high in the mountains.

This is how their Christmas was conveyed to them.
Of course the donkey's pack contained
a copy of the Holly Bough!



Our Christmas Long Ago

by Angela (Mitchelstown)

Christmas for us was magical long ago. There are five girls in our family. I'm in the middle with two younger siblings. The three of us believed in Santa. Every year, the decorations were brought out.

Paper buntings were hung from corner to corner across the ceiling. Then, the crib was brought out, a wooden one with attached figurines and placed on the mantelpiece.

There was a hook on top for an angel and as years went by, the angel got discoloured from smoke and we had a black angel!

Holly was placed on top of the crib and it had to have berries, nothing else would do. It was also placed at the sides of the Sacred Heart and other pictures. Then, Christmas cards were hung from a string over the fireplace.

As I said, three of us believed in Santa. I remember, I was learning to read and I wanted a storybook. We always wrote letters to Santa which we were told to post across the street in letter-box. That was "one for the North Pole". In fact, it was a Public House and the owners must have had a great time reading our childish handwriting. Anyway, I got my storybook - "Noddy and Big Ears" and I can't describe the joy I had in reading it. The characters to me were real!

One year, the sibling just younger than me said: "There is no Santa." I replied, "Of course, there is." To which my younger sister replied "Come upstairs and I will show you"

There, under the bed, were Santa's presents. I was gobsmacked ! We decided not to tell the youngest sister the truth. She was expecting a tricycle.

On Christmas Eve, when we were all tucked up in bed there was a noise downstairs. Anne, the aforementioned sister woke up and cried out : "Is that you Santa? Have you my bike?"

That's sixty years ago and to this day there is a chant in our family - "Is that you Santa? Have you got my bike ?"

Love, Angela.



My Christmas Memory of the 1950s

by Margaret (Mitchelstown)

Christmas Eve

My family consists of Dad, Mam, sister Kathleen and myself. We would awake early on Christmas Eve to do last minute shopping. I would collect a large bottle of cream from the Creamery in the Clonmel Road for the trifle which was made as follows:

Sponge finger biscuits soaked in cooking sherry, covered in jelly, then custard and lashings of thick cream and grated chocolate on top. No fridge then, only a box front covered with wire set up on the back wall of our house.

Mam would be roasting a joint of pork – the smell would drive us mad, as, of course, Christmas Eve was a “Fast Day” At mid-day, all would go to Confession. This was a very important part of Christmas. It would be crowded. Everyone wishing each other a Happy Christmas. For most of my teens, mass in Mount Mellary at midnight was a ritual for our family. Coming back down over the Vee, looking at all the houses lit up down far below was a magical sight. Back home after 1am to pork sandwiches.

This was the start of Christmas for me.

Christmas Day

I would always get something new – a coat or a frock. My stocking would have sweets, fruit, pack of new playing cards, maybe a knitted hat and gloves.

I was delighted with everything. After a dinner of pork, veg, roast potatoes and the trifle, especially the trifle, we just sat around the fire and played cards.

Of course we always visited over the Christmas, our Aunts and Uncles in Stagdale.

St Stephen's Day

On St Stephen's Day we would go on the "Hunting of the Wren", dressed up in our father's coats, turned inside out. Singing and dancing, travelling out to villages around us, and coming home late. The money was spent on L.P.s and records.

We did not have very much but then nobody had. We were happy with what we had. Lovely times – so different to now – maybe it was better than today ...



Christmas 1940s & 1950s in Fermoy

by John

During 1940s and early 1950s, Christmas week, I would go to town and have a look around at all the shops beautifully decorated with wonderful displays of toys, books and Christmas stockings. I could only look, with no chance of having them.

Then with my father I got lovely berry holly which we would put around the pictures and dresser. We made paper chains from colour paper to hang from the ceilings with colour balloons.

On Christmas Day, my mother would go to 7.30am mass with my sister Joan. My father would take me and my brothers to the 10am mass. We would have the "full irish" afterwards.

We got no Christmas presents. There was no Santa Claus in our house - it was the same for a lot of families. Very little work was around for the men during those years. Very sad, hard times for parents.



For Christmas Dinner, we had bacon... no turkey or ham, no Christmas cake or Christmas pudding. After dinner we would go to the local Ball Alley and play a good number of games - grateful. Nobody had T.V. until the 60's, we still had the oil lamps to light the house.

In 1949 my sister, Joan , aged 16 years emigrated to the U.S.A.

Christmas of 1951 was an amazing and wonderful time. We received a Trunk from Joan. It was like opening Aladdin's Cave.....It was full to the top of wonderful presents, the likes we had never seen before - Guns and holsters, jigsaw puzzles, colouring books, American comics, biscuits, sweets, clothes for my Mam and Dad.....beautiful jumpers with reindeers for me and my brothers. We felt so proud going to mass - myself and my brothers showing off our lovely jumpers, the likes of which was never seen in town before.

Also in the trunk was a fur coat for my mother but she never wore it at all and when asked why, she always replied "what would the people in the town think of me" ... but it didn't go to waste because when the weather was cold, it became a cozy blanket for the O'Mahony boys.

My sister was so kind and thoughtful to think of us in such a marvellous way.

Later as adults, when celebrating Christmas, we would remember "our very special Christmas" and remember our sister Joan who sadly died aged 35 years, leaving a family of five - one daughter, four sons and a husband in the U.S.A.

Christmas in Duhallow

by Nora

Christmas for me began when we all went to town to bring home "the Christmas" My mother bought tea, sugar, sweet treats, candles, clothes and the secret presents. We grew up on a farm and reared our own turkey or goose for Christmas dinner.

The Christmas shopping was special as the shopkeeper would give a present for loyal custom during the year. A precursor to the loyalty card now, but more personal. We watched, delighted at the large fruit or seed brack. We only saw sweet cakes or sugar treats at Christmas. Now, aisles of cakes and chocolate at the checkouts. The men went on to their local for "the Christmas" and enjoyed a drink on the house.

The standard order was bottles of porter for the neighbours and friends who called over the festive time. Topped up with a bottle of whiskey for the relatives from far away. Christmas was the only time we saw them, so a generous glass of punch in a scalded glass, sweetened with two spoons of sugar, was handed to both men and women. Good Luck was toasted as they remembered the births, marriages or deaths during the year. We all sat around the big open fire, listening to all the news. We learned the art of conversation from elders, no television or internet.

Religious services were the heart of Christmas, we all went to confession well before Christmas Eve. Long queues – young and old waited patiently outside the Confession Boxes. Some parishioners didn't go to confession during the year, but went at Christmas. Once, an old man went before everyone else to the glare of everyone around him! Now, sadly, hardly anyone goes to confession. The confidential saying of sins or problems to the Priest always gives ease to a troubled heart.

Christmas Eve, our joy was the simple presents. We hoped to receive a small toy or jack in the box. Not for us – expensive toys or the new phone model!

A candle was lit by the youngest in the house and placed on the kitchen window. It was a sign to remember family members who had passed away and also to welcome anyone who needed shelter.

Christmas morning, in the cold and dark, still fasting from Christmas Eve, we put on warm clothes. Then we travelled in open horse and cart to early mass, three miles away. We could see dim lights in houses – they too were going to mass.



We heard the heavenly organ and glorious voices of the choir as we entered the Church. The middle aisle was for the rich and grand ladies walked up with a fox fur over their shoulders.

The sermon was long but we didn't mind. When mass was over, friends and neighbours wished each other Happy Christmas.

Passing the houses on the street, frying filled the air. Fast over, we longed to get home and have breakfast. My father would see to the animals as my mother cooked the great feast of Christmas Dinner. Late evening, my father would say "Leave some money out for the "Wran Boys"

St Stephen's Day the "Wran Boys" came in disguise, sang and danced for pennies.

Christmas for us was simple, joyful and above all, Holy.



The Wran Days

The wran, The wran, the king of all birds,

St Stephenson's Day , He was caught on the furze,

Although he was little, His family was great,

Get up fair lady and give us a treat.



Christmas Around Macroom
50 Years Ago
by Maire

Although our grandparents didn't have Christmas trees, tinsel, fairy lights, mince pies, etc., Christmas then was exciting, awesome and unforgettable for us children. Santa's presents back then were far more modest, all fitting into a stocking. Practical items such as clothing and footwear could be found among books, board games and the odd doll and teddy. In contrast to nowadays, Christmas then began on Christmas Night and ended twelve days later on Nollaig na mBan on January 6th.

Usually on the Sunday before Christmas, red berry holly was collected. Only smooth, glossy leaved species would do and it was placed in a bucket of moist sand until Christmas Eve. As Tuesday was Market Day in Macroom, farmers collected their Christmas boxes from the shops, where they did regular business, on the last Tuesday before Christmas.

Mikie Twomey's Hardware always donated a red Christmas candle, which was reserved for the kitchen window. Lynch's Bakery added a fruit or seed brack to the weekly wellington or basket loaf. Warren's Chemist or O'Brien's Mills always came up trumps with a calendar, which had the phases of the moon on each page. If a calendar didn't have this information, it wasn't put up.

Christmas preparations began in earnest on Christmas Eve, when ivy covered candles were set in jam jars, one for each window. Holly and ivy was placed behind pictures, on the mantle and among the ware on the dresser. Dinner that day consisted of salted ling and onion sauce. Bags of logs and turf and some food were taken to the elderly living alone. At dusk, the youngest member of the household lit the candles and children ran in and out checking their neighbours lit up windows.

Some neighbours visited. The men had hot punch, while the ladies and children enjoyed Old Bell orange or red lemonade, made by O'Sheas Mineral Waters, Macroom or homemade blackcurrant cordial. A slice of boiled fruit cake or Lynch's brack would be eaten. Biscuits, presented by the local shop, were a real treat. As Santa was due any minute, children went to bed willingly, for once.



Christmas Day began with early morning Mass and a visit to the crib. Christmas Holy Water was always brought home. Only necessary work was done on the farm that day. Dinner then was usually a roast goose or duck or chicken, along with potato stuffing, creamy in the middle with a golden crust on top. Plum pudding and custard rounded off the feast. It was some achievement to cook a full meal from an open fire, with limited pots and bastibles.

After dinner, children played with their toys or read their new books. Adults read the Holy Bough or Ireland's Own or listened to Den Joe or Eamonn Kelly on the wireless. Often families went for a stroll after dark to count the neighbours lighted candles.



St. Stephen's day was for visiting or be visited. Wren boys with their holly bushes and blackened faces were especially welcome and were treated well, if they recited the Wren boy rhyme.

*The wren, the wren, the king of all birds.
On St. Stephen's day was caught in the furze.
From bush to bush and from tree to tree,
He went over the castle and broke his knee.
Up with the kettle and down with the pot,
Give us a penny and let us be off.*

*With a pocket full of money and a belly full of beer,
We wish you a Happy Christmas and a Merry New Year.*

Decorations and the candles were taken down on January 7th, when children returned to school.

Back then, Jesus was the reason for the season.
Can we say the same nowadays?





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