



Christmas 1942

Christmas

Perhaps we should talk a little about Christmas and other things in wartime. We were 5 children who had everything. Our parents, especially our father, were very keen on Christmas. The boys had Lionel trains (nothing but the best for his boys) and every year Dad added more. Mother found all the dolls and made all their clothes. She knit new mittens, scarves, hats and sweaters for us and for all the cousins.

Only after our father died 40 years later did we learn that every Christmas he took out a loan for the extravagance and then spent the year paying it off. And Mother, the ever faithful bookkeeper, had every single loan and paid receipt in a file. We never knew any of this until our Mother died (14 years after Dad) and our youngest sister, Frances, was assigned the task of clearing her accounts.

Dad, whenever he felt the need, took a loan, and Mother must have breathed a huge sigh of relief as each was paid off. If this created any stress in their lives, we were never aware of it. It was a way of life and they were good at it.

All the men not at war were asked to volunteer for sentry duty. Although Dad worked 12-hour days and commuted the 25 miles or so to Hartford, he took his turn at guard duty. This idea was meant to be a warning should they see any signs of German planes lighting the sky with planes filled with bombs. They were also to keep an eye out for infiltrators.

The Japanese were so very far away that it never occurred to anyone that they could get as far as the East Coast. We left the Japanese with their Hari-Kari to the Californians. And by the way, we knew only of California. No one ever suggested that Oregon and/or Washington might be a vulnerable.

By now you know that our road was gravel with rather large stones here and there. Also, there were only the orphanage, a small house with no children, the Korner, the Conklins and us right up to the corner for turning towards Route 44. We also had blackout shades on every window and after dark in the winter did not go out of the house. Dad and Bobbie walked down to our barn without a flashlight to tend to the animals.

We listened to the radio, which was on morning, noon and night. We were warned about sirens, which would alert us to an air raid, and there was a shortage of every thing. Luckily, we didn't need many food ration coupons, so I think Dad or Mother used to trade them for clothing, especially shoes. It takes a lot to provide garb for two adults and five children.

Still and all, we children used to sleep outside on the lawn all summer. Sleeping bags? Of course not. Never heard of them. We used Mother's oldest blankets and woke up damp and dewy in the morning. We also used the blankets as hoods and robes to walk up and down our road hoping to find someone to scare. We would make all kinds of eerie noises but we never did get an answer.

We listened to the radio show 'Lamont Cranston' where 'Only the shadow knows what lurks in the hearts of men'. We listened in the dark and learned all about blue coal. Our mother told us that meant anthracite and was

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Birthplace of Nathan Hale

hard and took longer to burn and so it was the very best. Unfortunately, we couldn't get it in the emergency and so we burnt wood..

As a family, we played Parchesi, hearts and other card games. I never liked to lose but we all played. I liked cards better than board games because I had a chance to control my luck to some extent. I always tried to pass the Queen of Spades in Hearts. Then I would feel sorry for the one I passed it to.

As time went on, our parents became very good friends with the Conklins and they took turns in our houses playing Whist and Hearts every Saturday night. They never did play poker and I guess weren't gamblers at heart. But they sure did yell a lot playing cards as, in that enterprise, all were most competitive.

As I have said, the relatives were always with us, especially on the weekends and during their vacations, and they all played cards. Then on Sundays before they went home to their jobs, they would all talk in the living room. We were sent upstairs to bed. Our stair faced the front door but it had a landing for the turn into the boys' bedroom and there we would sit very quietly listening. Of course, our parents knew we were there and, when the talk wasn't meant for tender ears, we were told to get into bed and to stay there.

Somewhere along the way, in a closet by the landing, Bobbie showed us our Dad's father's false teeth and other mementos of his life. After that, I was terrified to go upstairs alone. And I never did; not even in broad daylight. Bobbie said that the teeth were there to bite us when we were bad. I didn't really think that I was bad, but then who was I to judge?

Respectfully submitted, Jean Thibault Castagno

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