

Christmas in the country

A tradition of Christmas in the country was the Montgomery Ward Christmas Catalog.

It arrived at our mailbox some time in late October or early November. It sharpened the realization of impending holidays.

My siblings and I always did a good job of wearing out that catalog, but not before we made sure Mom had a list of articles to choose from, other than clothes, of course. If yearlings sold well and if flour mills paid a good price for wheat, she sometimes mailed in a Christmas order.

I had a silly little tradition all my own. On Christmas Day, I always went out to do chores early.

I gave the milk cows and horses we kept in the barn about half again as much grain as usual, the same for the hogs and chickens. They deserved a gift for their faithful service. I'm sure they appreciated the kindness and never did tattle.

Perhaps I was lucky none of them foundered. I kept that tradition going into my early teen years.

The strongest tradition in our community, however, was the Christmas program at our country school. Plans developed almost from the time school started in the fall.

Most of the neighbors had children in school, and those who didn't

enjoyed attending the show and seeing neighbors and friends.

On the selected evening, everybody rode to the one-room schoolhouse in a horse-drawn sleigh with its box filled with forkfuls of loose (unbaled) timothy hay for horses to eat during the festivities. At the conclusion of the program, Santa showed up with sacks of fruit, candy, nuts, etc. for everyone, young and old, before we all shouted "Merry Christmas" and rode home happy.

For some reason, my fourth-grade program stands out most vividly in reminiscence. As usual, we began early to practice songs, skits, and poems so they would be perfect when performed for the public.

Almost every day, for an hour after lunch recess, we rehearsed old, familiar carols such as "Silent Night," "Away in a Manger," "The First Noel," "Jingle Bells," and others. In addition, we refined various recitations until etched into memory.

No teacher ever settled for less than flawlessness.



Center Stage

Duane Portwood



Miss P was our teacher that year, and she decided to include a three-act play. For some reason, I got the lead role as head of a family. Bernice, a third-grader, became my spouse

Really, the only thing I remember about the play is, at the end of the third act, the script required me to take her in my arms and give her a kiss — not a simple peck on the cheek, but a genuine, honest-to-goodness, smack-on-the-lips-type kiss.

I questioned the need for the kiss, so Miss P agreed that a hug would suffice for practices, but during production, everything must follow the script. Practices went well and the hug at the end worked just fine.

Then, two or three days before the show, came dress rehearsal, the real thing. The play progressed nicely through all three acts. At the proper moment, Bernice stood before me, pucker and all. On a cuteness scale of 1 to 10, she ranked 9.2, and maybe higher.

I placed my hands on her shoulders

and leaned toward her. Every person in the school had eyes fixed upon us. Those eyes burned into me. My older sister snickered.

There is no delicate way to describe what happened next. My concentration, and my courage, evaporated. My face contorted into a portrait of pain and misery, and hot, salty tears streamed down my cheeks.

Bernice, still standing before me, saw her 9-year-old co-star transformed into a spectacle, blubbering like an infant. She regarded me with pity and wonder as I bawled my eyes out. Between sobs, I conveyed the idea that I didn't want to kiss a girl.

At last, the teacher made a decision in my favor saying something like, "I guess you can just hug her like you did in practice. Do you think you can do that?"

In answer, I nodded.

"Center Stage" is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan Community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.

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