

The Christmas I Remember Best

By Rheuama A. West

It should have been the worst, the bleakest of Christmas. It turned out to be the loveliest of all my life. I was nine years old, one of seven children and we lived in a little farming town in Utah. It had been a tragic year for all of us. But we still had our father and that made all the difference.

Every year in our town a Christmas Eve Social was held at the church. How well I remember Dad buttoning our coats, placing us all on our long, homemade sleigh and pulling us to the church about a mile away. It was snowing. How cold and good it felt on our faces. We held tight to one another and above the crunch of snow beneath Dad's feet we could hear him softly whistling "Silent Night."

Mama had died that previous summer. She had been confined to bed for three years, so Dad had assumed all mother and father responsibilities. I remember him standing me on a stool by our big round kitchen table and teaching me to mix bread. But my main task was being Mama's hands and feet until that day in June, her own birthday, when she died.

Two months later came the big fire. Our barns, sheds, haystacks and livestock were destroyed. It was a calamity, but Dad stood between us and the disaster. We weren't even aware of how poor we were. We had no money at all.

I don't remember much about the Christmas Eve Social. I just remember Dad pulling us there and pulling us back. Later, in the front room around our pot-bellied stove, he served us our warm milk and bread. Our Christmas tree, topped by a little worn cardboard angel, had been brought from nearby hills. Strings of our homegrown popcorn made it the most beautiful tree I had ever seen - or smelled.

After supper, Dad made all seven of us sit in a half circle by the tree. I remember I wore a long flannel nightgown. He sat on the floor facing us and told us that he was ready to give us our Christmas gift. We waited, puzzled because we thought Christmas presents were for Christmas morning. Dad looked at our expectant faces. "Long ago," he said, "on a night like this, some poor shepherds were watching their sheep on a lonely hillside, when all of a sudden..."

His quiet voice went on and on, telling the story of the Christ Child in his own simple words, and I'll never forget how love and gratitude seemed to fill the room. There was light from the oil lamp and warmth from the stove, but somehow it was more than that. We felt Mama's presence.

We learned that loving someone was far more important than having something. We were filled with peace and happiness and joy. When the story was ended Dad had us all kneel for a family prayer. Then he said, "try to remember, when everything else seems to be lost, the greatest thing of all remains: God's love for us. That's what Christmas means. That's the gift that can never be taken away."

The next morning, we found that Dad had whittled little presents for each of us and hung them on the tree, dolls for the girls, whistles for the boys. But he was right; he had given us our real gift the night before.

All this happened long ago, but to this day it all comes back to me whenever I hear "Silent Night" or feel snowflakes on my face, or - best of all - when I get an occasional glimpse of Christ shining in my 90 year-old father's face.