

Christmas in the Old Days



Photo courtesy of Gregg Capstick

Residents enjoy their newly furnished common room.

by Margrit Gahlinger

A special gathering took place at Alex Capstick Manor in Dingwall on a mid-November afternoon. For residents and friends, a simple question brought them quickly back in time.

Christmas – what was it like in the old days?

Houses were not warm, they all agreed. And the use of precious firewood stingy. But the parlour was open for this special occasion.

Not everybody had a tree up and it was not lighted. There was plenty of light from the kerosene lamps. Tinsel from a package of loose tea, or wherever else it might be pounced upon, added the glitter. Old Christmas cards, perhaps trimmed, were hung with bits of ribbon. The tree went up on Christmas Eve and came down on the “old Christmas” in early January.

Yes, stockings were hung! Made of wool. Candy would stick to it if you were lucky enough to get it! Some were women’s stockings, long, to be rolled up over the knees to keep warm in the winter in a time when women did not wear pants. It took the second world war to do that. Some were men’s socks. The bigger the better!

Inside the socks there might be fudge and raisins. Fudge didn’t cost much to make. Perhaps an orange or two. And maybe some molasses cookies.

“That was Christmas. Whatever was in the stocking, that was it!”

Now and then there might be a practical gift. Huggers (ankle socks) and mittens. Homemade skis or snowshoes or “stock” skates - two old files on a wooden base serving as a blade, outfitted with straps to attach to a boot or shoe.

“Most kids around you didn’t get gifts. We didn’t go looking for it. There was no money. No EI.”

Midnight mass took place at midnight. In the early years there was no priest in

Dingwall. Everyone tried to go to the mass at St. Margaret Village. Even Protestants felt welcome. For a while there was a bus to take them, but that came later.

Everyone wore their best clothes. Among them some homemade coats. There was a lot of weaving in the area in those times. And shirts made from flour bags, - the sugar ones were even nicer!

If they didn’t take the “shank’s mare” they walked. From Aspy Bay, from the backlands and beyond, Meat Cove and even Lowland Cove. They made their way in the soft light of their lanterns through the dark, listening for the cheery sound of the bells on the horses.

They gathered amidst the candlelight and music in St. Margaret’s Church. Some made a night of it!

The Christmas day feast could vary. If you didn’t raise it you didn’t have it. There were not many turkeys around. But you could count on the plum pudding, steamed in a bag, served with brown sugar sauce.

It was a holy day more than anything else. A time for being generous with those in need.

It was an occasion indeed!

As we ended our discussion the women wanted to show off their newly decorated lounge. They expressed their appreciation for help from the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority and Victoria County for the new furnishings.

“It’s like home now!”

We finished with a bit of dancing, tea, and a lot of heartfelt singing, made especially so by the rendition of some Gaelic songs, still remembered and so much older than our “old times” - delivered by Florence Bonnar of Bay St. Lawrence and Hannah Fraser of Dingwall.

This gathering ended the 2010 Seniors Health Literacy program at the Manor. It was sponsored by the Community Learning Association North of Smokey.

The Book Nook

by Kate Oland

Recently, I was telling my children about some of my favorite childhood Christmas gifts - the magic eight ball, the box of fancy vintage dresses for playing dress-up, a pink sweater lovingly knitted by my grandmother (who, unfortunately, thought I was about four sizes larger than I actually was).

Many of my favorite Christmas gifts were books. They weren’t flashy, like a new red sled or a talking doll, but they had staying power. Long after toys and novelties had lost their appeal, I could still curl up by the fire with a good book. Some of the most cherished ones are still on my shelves, and being read by my own children.

Our family loved to laugh, and it became traditional to find Gary Larsen’s latest cartoon volume under the tree. While my brothers and I spent hours chuckling over Larsen’s singular vision of the world (the man was obsessed with cows), my dad preferred the subtler humour of “Herman,” which was guaranteed to reduce him to a writhing mass of hysterical, teary-eyed laughter. We took to saving “Herman” for Dad’s last present, because we knew he’d be hopeless for the rest of the day once he started reading.

Another Christmas book tradition - at the opposite end of the literary scale - was my brother’s annual gift to me of the newest Stephen King release (horror novels are so festive, don’t you think?). I remember reading long into the night, every light in my room blazing to ward off whatever terrors the book was conjuring up in my imagination. The lingering, chilling after-effects of reading a King novel - truly “the gift that keeps on giving”.

One of my all-time favorite literary pre-

sents was the complete boxed set of C.S. Lewis’ “Narnia Chronicles”. This Christmas movie-goers will flock to see “Voyage of the Dawn Treader” based on Lewis’ book by the same name, and no doubt it will be wonderful, but I’ll still like the book better. I’ve read the entire series many times since I received it as a child, and have read it to my own children - and I haven’t grown tired of it. As a Christmas present goes, it’s one that gave incredible bang for the buck.

There were “useful” books, too - a dictionary and thesaurus from my uncle the year I went to college, books on writing and music and other pastimes, cookbooks, journals, and craft books. Then of course there was the memorable Christmas, when I was in my mid-twenties and rather undecided about my future, when I received only two books: a volume on job-finding from my dad, and a book about pregnancy and childbirth from my mom. Subtle.

If there’s a book-lover on your Christmas list, the library can help. You can adopt a book on behalf of someone you love, and have it placed in your local library with a commemorative bookplate acknowledging your gift. If your recipient has a special interest, we can work with you to find a book on that subject.

If you’re near Baddeck Library, check out our excellent second-hand book store. Sales of second-hand books in good condition help us raise funds for our programs and services - and our reasonable prices can help you make a book-lover’s dream come true on Christmas morning!

Kate Oland, Baddeck Branch/Victoria County Bookmobile - 295-2055
Leona Stockley, Victoria North Regional Branch (Ingosh) - 285-2544

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From my family to yours:
Enjoy the holidays with loved ones & friends!

Here’s wishing you a very happy and prosperous new year.



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