

A LOOK BACK AT ONE CHRISTMAS

BY GEORGENE CONLEY

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The background:

I was born and grew up in Merriman in the sandhills of Nebraska, in a very small town where they posted the population as three hundred, but I'm sure they must have counted part of the dogs and cats to come up with that many. Daddy was manager of the lumber yard there and even during the "dirty thirties", when this event took place, daddy had a job. The "great depression" was starting and he had to take a salary out, but not to the extent he did later.

There were only four in our family, people that is, for we always had kitties, a milk cow, a flock of chickens and sundry other livestock, but no dogs – Mother put her foot down because dogs had a habit of digging and in that soft white sand a dog could dig a basement hole before you could stop him, and Mother's yard and flowers were a passion with her. But back to the family; there was daddy, who was very manly but soft and loving and had a heart as big as all outdoors although he was small in stature. Mother who put her foot down about lots of things because daddy was so big hearted and Mother was constantly reminding us that if it wasn't for her, daddy would land the lot of us in the poor house. My sister Fran, who was seven years older than I was, with artistic talents and a temperament to go with them. And me, the tomboy, who was constantly in hot water, was much loved by daddy, despised of by Mother and ignored by Fran because, after all, she was a young lady of 17 when I was but 10, and a pretty young 10 at that.

Daddy decided that Christmas in 1930, when I was 10 and Fran was 17, that we would go to Battle Creek, Nebraska where mother's parents and other relatives lived, for the holiday. It was the first time we had ever gone any place in the winter time and we were to go on the train. I'd never ridden on a train either. How

excited I was! Daddy made arrangements, with a secret smile in his eyes, because he was making the rest of us so happy. Mother didn't put her foot down nearly as often and Fran tried to be temperamental but deep down was as excited as the rest of us. I was head and shoulders above the rest of the gang of rough and tumble kids I ran around with because I was going to grandpa and grandma's for Christmas and was going on the train. I savored every minute of it.

The big day came, one of the men who worked for daddy at the lumber yard came and got us at 6:00 P.M. in the "company car" that daddy usually drove and took us to the depot. There was lots of snow but the weather had turned mild a few days before and it had settled into mounds of hard packed ice.

The big steam engine eased by at the station, the drive wheels squeaking and squealing as it pulled the baggage cars and finally the coaches up to the platform. All of our suitcases and parcels were loaded and the conductor helped us aboard. I was so excited, I knew I was going to have to go to the bathroom although mother had seen to it that I went just before we left home. I didn't say a word to mother but told daddy and he assured me there was a bathroom on the train and that he would show me where as soon as we were under way. Suddenly, I didn't have to go nearly as much. The conductor turned a seat over so we had two seats facing each other. Mother said she couldn't ride going backward or she'd get car sick so daddy and I rode going backward and mother and Fran rode going forward. Daddy gave me the seat by the window and I watched as the train pulled out, the little mainstreet, the few houses of my friends and then the countryside, the sandhills covered with snow with only the yucca or soap weeds, as we called them, showing. The sky was clear and the stars so bright. By placing my hands around my face I could shut out the lights in the coach and see everything outside very clearly.

How long this occupied me, I don't know, but after a while daddy said he was going to the smoker and did I still have to use the bathroom. I really didn't have to go that bad but thought I'd better check out the place just in case I really had to go later. We wobbled down the isle, holding fast to the seats, to the back of the coach. There daddy showed me the tiniest bathroom I had ever seen, and said when I was finished to go back to where mother and Fran were and NO! I couldn't

go to the smoker with him, only men went there. I closed and fastened the door, up came the blue serge jumper skirt that mother had made from daddy's old suit, up came the black sateen petticoat, the wool knit petticoat came next, the down came the black sateen bloomers and finally the 3 buttons on the back side trap door were mastered. Later – the whole procedure was reversed and back I went to our seats. This time I had the whole seat to myself. Mother had brought her knitting and was busy knitting one mitten for me. I always managed to lose just one mitten. I can't remember ever having 2 new mittens at the same time. If I lost the right one mother knitted a new one, if it was the left one mother knitted a new one, she couldn't see any need in throwing one perfectly good mitten away, not with yarn costing 39 cents a skein. They were always brown and the shade always varied some but they were warm, style didn't matter much in those days as long as they were warm.

I alternated between looking out the window and watching the other passengers. I made up stories in my mind about them. I was sure they were all going some place exciting for Christmas, just as we were. About the time I started to get bored with my games. Mother had Fran get the shoe box, tied with strong white store string, down from the luggage rack above our heads and took from it sandwiches made from her good homemade bread and thick oatmeal cookies full of nuts and raisins. It tasted so good and it also gave me a chance to show Fran how the water fountain at the back of the coach worked, how you placed the tiny folding aluminum cup from mother's purse under the spout, pressed the little button and a tiny stream of fresh cold water filled the tiny cup. Fran managed to carry a cup back to mother and hardly spilled any.

Occasionally the train would stop at another small Nebraska town and I would watch with much interest as people got up stiffly, gathered their belongings and got off the train, some to be greeted joyously by loved ones and others to wander off alone into the darkness. Others got on and I had new people to watch and fantasize about. I stayed awake as long as my 10 year old eyes would stay open but finally mother carefully folded my Sunday coat for a pillow and I lay down in the seat as the swaying coach and clickety - clack of the wheels on the tracks put me to sleep. I didn't know when daddy came back from the smoker and sat in an empty seat across the aisle. Did the rest of the family sleep? I never knew. The next thing I knew daddy gently shook me and told me it was 4:30 A.M. and

we were there. We were in Battle Creek and grandpa was waiting to take us to his and grandma's home. The fresh cold air woke me as daddy guided me down the train steps and there was grandpa ready to gather me in a bear hug and kiss me with his moustache sticking and tickling at the same time.

Grandpa had come to the station in his model T Ford, especially gotten ready for the occasion, because grandpa put the car in the garage in October and didn't get it out until April. There wasn't room for all of us in the front, so mother and Fran rode in the seat with grandpa and daddy and I got in the little box behind, along with all the luggage. It was a cold ride although grandpa always drove very slowly and sedately no matter where he went or on what occasion. Daddy opened his brand new sheepskin lined coat that we had gotten him for Christmas and had encouraged him to open before we left home so he would have it for the trip, and gathered me inside. How warm it was and how good daddy smelled, tobacco smoke, fresh starched shirt and love, I buried my nose in his chest and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the short ride to grandpa's house. Grandma was waiting at the door, my tiny, darling English grandma, her hair in a little bun on top of her head and her skirts nearly reaching the floor. We were all duly hugged and kissed, both grandma and mother cried. I wondered why then, I know now. Of course we had to eat; any time anyone went to grandma's house they had to eat. After we had eaten grandma insisted we all had to go to bed for a few hours. Fran and I were to sleep on the sunporch and grandma was so afraid it wouldn't be warm enough so we undressed in the bathroom, put on our long flannel nightgowns, that mother had thoughtfully packed right on top, and followed grandma to the sunporch. There we really got a surprise, the bed was made with one featherbed on the bottom and another one to cover us. Grandpa had even heated bricks and wrapped them in craps of woolen cloth to warm the bed. I had thought that I couldn't sleep any more after my sleep on the train and my excitement, but I was soon warm and cozy and sound asleep. To remember my first train ride, my first and only trip to grandpa and grandma's for Christmas. That was the only time we got to go, the depression got so much worse and there wasn't money for train fare, and Fran and I grew older and were more involved with other things.

I believe in each person's life there is one Christmas that we remember with just a little more nostalgia than any other and this one is mine.

By, Georgene Conley

Written At Christmas time 1974

Continued:

I awakened on Christmas morning, that Christmas of 1930, when I was 10 and my sister Fran was 17. The one Christmas our family went to eastern Nebraska to spend the holiday with grandma and grandpa. I turned over, with difficulty, I might add, for it was not easy with one featherbed beneath and one on top. I looked to see if Fran was still sleeping, I was alone, at sometime Fran had awakened and slipped out of bed without awakening me. The room was cold although the sun was shining in through the frost covered window. How I hated to put my bare feet down on the cold linoleum. But it was Christmas morning and beyond that carefully closed door was Christmas excitement. I hopped out of bed and ran to the door and flung it open, open to grandma's kitchen with it's big black range covered now with pots, pans and skillets what were emitting the most mouth- watering smells imaginable. Mother and grandma were busy at the stove and worktable, talking a mile a minute, catching up on years of small talk they had missed.

They took time out to say, "good morning", and "Merry Christmas", and mother told me to have daddy help me with my long underwear and stockings because she didn't want me running around all day with lumpy underwear under my stockings. She also told me to dress in the bathroom where it was warm and to hop to it because breakfast was nearly ready. If there was one thing my mother insisted on it was everybody at the table and on time. She always said if she worked her fingers to the bone getting a good meal ready for us, the least we could do was be on hand to eat it when it was ready. Mother was always working her fingers to the bone on something.

I scurried into the bathroom, slipped out of my long, flannel nightgown and into my clothes, all except my long cotton stockings and shoes, these I carried into the living room where daddy and grandpa were visiting. Fran was in the dining room setting the table that was stretched out to full length for the big Christmas dinner that was yet to come. She was grumbling because it was impossible to make a table look artistic when we were only going to use one end of it. Grandma had put an old colored tablecloth over the end against spills until dinnertime. Daddy had me sit on a footstool and put my feet in his lap, thus the ritual began. First my foot went on with the leg of the stockings bunched down around my ankle, then the leg of the long underwear was pulled down as far as possible, the cuff was then wrapped around my ankle as tightly as daddy could wrap it without cutting off the circulation and the stockings quickly pulled up over it to hold it. Daddy was a first class cuff wrapper and stocking puller, of course I couldn't bend my knees without getting round shouldered but there were no lumpy ankles either. Daddy sent me to the bathroom to hurry and wash my hands and face and brush my teeth. I brushed my hair too but Fran just wasn't satisfied with my efforts and recombed it, in spite of my protestations. She always managed to find tangles that I missed and had no mercy on my poor scalp. By the time I was presentable grandma and mother had breakfast on the table, I barely had time to "oh" and "ah" over the huge Christmas tree that stood in shining splendor in the corner of the living room. It was adorned, not with twinkling electric lights, but with candles, each in its little brass holder, waiting to be lighted and gazed at, in wonder, for a few minutes by the children while the menfolk stood by the buckets of water, just in case, and the womenfolk nervously glanced at one another hoping it would soon be over so everyone could relax.

Mother called breakfast one more time and I really skedaddled to the table and slipped into my chair. Grandpa asked the Lord's blessing over the group of carefully bowed heads. I thanked God too, in my own way, for Christmas at grandpa's and grandma's, for the ride on the train, for all the good smells coming from the kitchen and all the mysterious packages heaped beneath the big tree in the corner. I don't think I gave Christ's birth a single thought but grandpa certainly did. When I finished my own private "thank you" grandpa was still praying, for when grandpa had a group to pray for he always waxed very eloquent and his table blessings might last several minutes. Grandma always said guests never ate a hot meal at their house because grandpa's blessings always lasted until the food was half cold. I could see grandma squirming in her chair out of the corner of my eye although I knew I was supposed to have my eyes shut. At long last grandpa said

“Amen”, and the grownups started talking again, me, I was ready to tie into grandma’s “special occasion” oatmeal. She made it with raisins and ground cinnamon and had it topped with brown sugar and cream. There was grandma’s homemade bread toasted to golden crispness in the oven, a big glass of milk for me and coffee for the grownups, also dishes of homecanned peaches and chewy ginger cookies. I’m sure the fruit and cookies were served because it was Christmas, we didn’t have such elegant fare for breakfast at home.

Soon we were all pleasantly full and mother and grandma went to make all the beds while Fran and I washed and dried the dishes, naturally I wanted to wash, and I knew all the time I wouldn’t be allowed. I was also sure Fran delighted in telling me I was too short to reach the dishpan. In those days it seemed like grownups were always telling me I was too little to do the things I wanted to do so that I was too big a girl to do little kid things. I spent a lot of time wondering which I was, little or big? Anyway I dried the dishes, being careful not to let the dishtowel touch the floor as mother had taught me at home. Fran knew enough to dip the dishwater and rinse water out of the reservoir on the big black range. When I asked her why she didn’t take it out of the faucet at the sink like we did at home, she said, “because the water in the reservoir is water out of the rain barrel and the water from the faucet is hard”. Being raised in the sandhills where all the water is the same, I had no idea what hard or soft water was but decided I’d just wait and ask daddy about it and also ask him about the rain barrel, we didn’t have any such thing at home.

The beds were all made and the breakfast dishes duly dispatched, the family then gathered in the living room for the Bible reading and prayer that was a part of my grandparent’s daily lives for their more than 60 years of marriage. Grandpa read all the Christmas stories from the big old-fashioned family Bible followed by another lengthy prayer. Both mother and grandma were getting fidgety by the time he finished and rushed back to the kitchen. Fran went back to the dining room where she resumed work on a centerpiece she was making for the table, I tagged along and noticed all of grandma’s houseplants grandly displayed in the big bay window on the south side of the dining room. Such an array of green foliage and colored flowers fairly boggled the imagination. I touched the green foliage then timidly touched a blossom, I touched it again, it wasn’t a real flower, it was made of paper. I began methodically touching all the flowers, part of them were real and

part of them were paper. Here was another puzzle, and being the type of youngster who didn't like unsolved puzzles, I braved mother's warning "not to bother the grownups with silly questions when they were busy", and went into the kitchen. I asked grandma why some of her plants had real flowers and some had paper ones. "Dolly" she said, grandma always called all her granddaughters dolly because she got our names all mixed up. "Dolly" she said, "it never hurts to give mother nature a hand when she needs it and best keep a close mouth about it too". Gee, I was more confused than ever, I'd have to remember to ask daddy about that one too. I'd really have a lot to ask him about, the list grew longer as the day wore on. I was to learn much later that grandma had the distinction of having the most beautiful collection of house plants in town and she wasn't about to lose it when a bit of colorful crepe paper would help her keep it.

Soon the other relatives began to arrive. Everyone came laden down with food and more packages to add to the pile already under the tree. No wonder grandpa and grandma had put up such a big tree, it took a big one to shelter all the gifts. There were uncles and aunts and cousins, old friends, who's families were far away, even a couple grandpa and grandma had invited who had no family in this country and who talked with a heavy accent. There were plenty of kids but they were all older than I was. I was sort of used to it, I was the last baby born in the entire family and had come as a big surprise even to my parents. Mother always acted just a little embarrassed about it but daddy was as proud as punch. I hung around the big kids as much as they would allow, I really wanted to climb up on daddy's lap and sit but had been told several years ago that I was too big for that, although we still sneaked in a little lap sitting and loving when no one else was around.

Grandma brought all the ladies in from the kitchen and announced it was time to open the gifts, the big kids drew straws to see who was going to distribute the packages. There was much scraping and carrying as chairs were brought in from every room in the house so all the grownups could sit down. I scrambled over people and legs and sat down on the floor at daddy's feet. He reached down and patted the hand I reached up to him and I was content. The packages were all sorted with much scrambling and fussing, trying to read name tags and not tear the fragile white tissue paper that was the most popular wrapping material then.

Before we opened our gifts we had our long-awaited moment of joy. Grandpa did the honors and lighted the candles on the tree.

One of my uncles was guardian of the water bucket and stood close by. Various types of Christmas lights will come and go but nothing will ever quite take the place of the thrill we all experienced as all those tiny live flames flickered and glowed for the few minutes they were allowed to burn. The warm smell of the candle wax and the heated evergreen tree mingled to create a fragrance that will mean Christmas to anyone who experienced it as a child.

It was over all too soon for the youngsters, and all the grownups heaved a sigh of relief knowing the tree wasn't going to catch on fire. Now for the gift opening ceremony or should I say chaos, at home our Christmas gift opening was as carefully supervised as were the rest of our activities with the family members taking turns opening gifts and displaying them. Here everyone began at once with paper, bright colored ribbons, boxes and general debris flying in all directions, the din was deafening as everyone talked, laughed and shouted at once. I imagine my

voice was as loud as any and I unwrapped my gifts, most of them were cloths that were always needed but there were a few toys too.

After a while mother made her way through the mess and gathered up nearly all our gifts and took them to the bedroom where they were stowed away to go home. Daddy and some of the other men started picking up all the paper and other left overs and put them all in a big box and sent it down to the basement to be burned later in the big brick furnace. The women all made their way back to the kitchen where the traditional Christmas feast was in the making. Serenity reigned in the rest of the house, the men settled down to visit and the children were busy with new games. I took a new jigsaw puzzle to a small table by the window and was about to open it when grandma beckoned me to her side from the bedroom door. "Dolly", she said, "something terrible has happened and I need your help". All kinds of scenes ran through my mind, the house was on fire and I could put it out, someone was awfully sick and I could save a life, whatever it was I would be a hero and then the big kids would wish they had been nicer to me. Grandma pulled me into the bedroom and whispered, "your grandpa made me get some new lower teeth. They hurt my mouth so as soon as breakfast was over I took them out and put them in my apron pocket. Dinner will be ready in a little while and when I reached in my pocket to get my teeth they weren't there. The only thing I can think of is that they fell out of my pocket when we were opening gifts and are among all that waste paper in the big box in the basement. Go downstairs and see if you can find them and hurry because dinner will soon be ready and I don't want pa to find out, they were more costly and he would scold me." I turned and started for the stairway, "Don't tell a soul, Dolly." There went my chances to be a hero. Down the stairs I went, after first turning on the lights by flipping the switch at the top of the stairs. The basement was warm and there on the floor was the big box of paper I had to unload to try and find grandma's teeth. The thought suddenly hit me, What would I do if I did find them, I didn't want to touch them with my bare hands, I sure wished I had my mittens. I decided not to worry about that problem until I had found them. I pulled up a low stool I found near the wall, reached up and finally managed to pull the box over on its side. It was taller than I was but there was no weight since all it contained was loose paper. The huge mass of paper came tumbling out at my feet, as I started pawing through it my eyes started looking, not for grandma's teeth, but looking at all the pretty ribbons and the beautiful colored seals that adorned the pieces of white tissue paper. I began tearing off the brightly colored seals and started a "goody pile" for me. The ribbons and colored twine were added as I came to them. I didn't know exactly

what I would do with them; I just knew they were too pretty to be burned. I became so engrossed tearing off seals and sorting out ribbon and string that I lost all track of time. How much time slipped by, I will never know. The next thing I knew daddy came down the stairs and told me they were waiting dinner on me, that they had searched the house for me with no success and why had I come down here without telling anyone. There was just a hint of crossness in his voice, daddy was never very cross with me. I wanted to tell him that grandma had sent me down but grandma had told me not to tell a soul and I guessed that included daddy. All at once it came to me, I hadn't gotten clear to the bottom of the box and I hadn't found grandma's teeth. I knew I was in for it now, Why! oh! Why! did I always get in Dutch with the grownups. I really didn't know what I could tell grandma. If I told her the teeth weren't there when I really didn't know for sure I would be telling a falsehood. If I admitted I hadn't really looked for them I would be breaking a trust. I decided, as daddy and I ran upstairs, that I would just say I hadn't found them. I was sorry that grandma was going to get scolded by grandpa, I couldn't imagine grandpa scolding anyone but then maybe I only saw him using his company manners and believe me I knew there was a difference between everyday manners and company manners. Everyone was at the table and daddy and I hurried to our places. Once more grandpa gave his lengthy blessing and once more everyone ate their fill. Fran was showered with praise over the beauty of her centerpiece and for once she was given real credit for her artistic talent. I kept sneaking looks at grandma, wondering if she would be able to eat anything but gravy with out half her teeth. I couldn't understand it but she was eating everything just like the rest of the crowd. I don't remember what I ate or if I enjoyed it, I was worried because I just knew mother and grandma and goodness knows who else were really going to land on me after dinner. The meal was over all too soon, I wanted to go back to the basement where I would be alone and I nearly made it, but there was grandma becoming to me from the bedroom door. I timidly went to her. "Oh Dolly" she said, "I'm so sorry, I found my teeth in my everyday apron pocket hanging right behind the bedroom door, I forgot I had changed my apron when we went in to open our gifts. I was so relieved and so busy I completely forgot about sending you to look for them. Now you run along and play." Oh! Boy! Was that a load off my chest. I wished I'd known it before dinner so I could have enjoyed all the goodies more. I did know if I got hungry there was plenty to eat in the kitchen and grandma would help me.

Shortly after the dinner dishes were washed all the relatives and friends gradually left and the house settled down quietly. I was ready for bed even before mother said it was time. It had been a big day.