

Dog Days of Christmas

By Doreen Millichamp

We were a family of four children with very loving parents, an uncle who lived with us, and a one-year-old Sheppard dog named Princess. Princess made the Christmas of 1954 a "Day to Remember" in our family.

Princess loved to catch garter snakes in our backfield and shake the daylight out of them. She loved grabbing strings or ropes, and playing, shaking or pulling on them.

The children helped Mom decorate the seven-foot high and very wide Christmas tree that Dad bought. It was a real Scotch pine, not like the artificial white ones we have now. I can still smell the various aromas that lingered in the living room from the Christmas tree and Mom's home baked cookies.

Mom put up the electric dripping icicle stringers. My older sister Neva and I were handed shiny coloured glass balls one at a time. We all shared in hanging up some kind of ornament on the tree. Very small wooden toys on a string were handed to my five-year-old brother, Larry, to hang for the lower branches. We took turns handing Dad glossy ornaments to hang on the upper branches. Then when all the ornaments were up, Mom would place the glimmering garlands around the tree.

Tinsel and sparkle, twinkle and glow, candy canes and snowy pine cones made the Christmas tree a beautiful sight. One of our rituals was that the smallest child would place the bright Silver Star of David on top of the tree. It represented the Jewish star that Jesus was born under. Dad lifted up my sister, Rose Marie, on his shoulders. She gleefully put this last item on the tree. Everything was perfect.

The Christmas tree was usually put up one week before Christmas. Now all we had to do was to wait for the presents to arrive. Postal boxes filled with presents came from afar from family members, but they were always put into Mom and Dad's room until Christmas Eve. That room was off limits for a few weeks before Christmas. That was when all the presents were placed under the tree.

We always made our own Christmas cards and placed them on a string hanging by the window. Each day before Christmas, the mail would

arrive and new cards were added. Soon the greeting cards dangled around the whole living room.

During that time most presents were either gift-wrapped in colored tissue paper with ribbons, or we used comics from the newspaper with string.

We always went to Midnight Services at our Church, which actually began at 10:00 p.m. On Christmas Eve of that year, mom fed us a late supper and got us all ready. Before we left, we joyously stood back and watched Dad placing the presents carefully under the tree. Princess had fun sniffing the presents out and Dad had to keep pushing her away and telling her to stay out from under the tree.

Ten p.m. arrived. Stuffing ourselves into the Volkswagen was a fun challenge: three kids in the back seat, and two adults and the smallest child in the front. We arrived in anticipation amongst the good wishes of our friends and neighbours. There was a short play on the Nativity, a message from our priest, and the lighting of the candles of new Hope and Peace in the world. I loved the dark church with only the lighted candles held by the adults, as we sang Christmas Carols. This was a magical and a highlight of our childhood Christmas.

On that particular night when we arrived home, my youngest sister and brother were sleeping in the car. Mom and Dad each picked up a child and carried them into the house. Princess usually would greet us at the door, but this time she did not.

As they entered the living room to cross over to the bedroom an astonishing sight met their eyes. Strewn all over the living room were all the Christmas presents. All opened with tissue paper ripped, torn, and scattered all over the room.

Mom looked horrified and said out loud, "Who could have done this?"

Hearing her cry, my sister Neva and I looked in from the kitchen and saw the mess. I piped up and said, "We've been robbed!"

Dad looked closer and saw that all the gifts were there just scattered. He called Princess, in a stern voice, but she would not come out from under the chesterfield.

By now my sister and brother awoke weary-eyed but after looking about they were worried about their presents.

We usually opened our presents on Christmas morning, but Mom decided that since we were all awake now, we could have what was left of our presents somehow. We were told to find a seat on the floor. Carefully she would pick up a game, look it over and give it to the person she thought it was meant for. The same was done for clothing like mitts, hats, sweaters or pants.

Thus our most memorable Christmas of all time was in 1954. We still laugh and talk about it from time to time and we have certainly passed this story along to our new family members.

December 05, 1990.