

# Santa and the Christmas Candles

THE temperature stood at zero, with 14 inches of snow on the western Kansas prairie.

My 11-year-old sister, Grace, and I helped prepare the wagon for the 4-mile trip to our grandparents' farm. On this frigid Christmas Eve, we knew our Model T Ford had no chance of getting us through to Grandpa and Grandma White's house.

Dad put the extra 12-inch sideboards on the wagon so we would have room to sit upright in the back. We fastened a canvas cover over the top of the wagon and hung a lantern on a bar inside to help keep us warm. Dad covered the floor of the wagon with straw over which Mother placed thick quilts.

Once the food and presents were loaded, Grace and I scrambled inside under the canvas. Mother climbed in with us, and Dad sat bundled up outside on the spring seat to drive the team.

I heard the snow crunch under the wagon wheels as our horses labored along. Tucked in on quilts and straw, surrounded by a mouth-watering aroma of baked turkey and sugar-cured ham, we daydreamed of the Christmas feast to come.

Our three cousins and their parents, who lived halfway to our grandparents' home, joined us as we came by and pulled their wagon in behind ours.

## All the Folks at Home

We arrived about sundown, and Grandpa and Grandma greeted us with warm hugs. The tempting fragrance of fresh-baked bread and spicy pumpkin pie floated from the big, toasty kitchen of their two-story native stone house.

Everyone carried food and presents from the wagons. We put the

presents under Grandpa's homemade Christmas tree in the living room.

He had drilled holes in a cedar fence post and fitted small, dry branches in the holes to make the tree. He wrapped the entire tree in white cotton, draped long strings of popcorn and red cranberries over it, then fastened a candle to the end of each branch.

After a quick supper of sandwiches and milk, we gathered in the living room and Grandpa lit the candles on the tree. Two gas lamps, with mantles brightly glowing, hung from hooks in the ceiling. My dad opened the door of the potbellied heating stove and poked up the fire.

Grandpa offered a Christmas prayer before we joined our aunt at the piano to sing some songs. In the pause between carols, we heard a loud knocking on the front door.

Grandpa looked at us and said, "Now, I wonder who that could possibly be."

The door burst open, and in came Santa Claus, stomping snow from his boots. We scooted closer to our mothers.

"Ho, ho, ho!" Santa shouted. "Have you been good children this year?"

When we nodded shyly, he handed out bags of candy and nuts.

Then Santa went over to the Christmas tree, where candles softly fluttered, and began taking gifts out of his pack.

### Santa Got the Biggest Surprise

Partly blinded by his beard and clothing, Santa got too close to a flaming candle and his white beard caught fire!

Quickly, my dad and two uncles jumped on Santa to pull off his beard. In the excitement and scuffle, someone bumped the Christmas tree, knocking over candles. Now the tree was blazing, as well as Santa's beard.

Grandma dashed into the kitchen, grabbed the pail of drinking water, returned and doused Santa and my dad. Grandpa dragged the burning tree out a side door into the snow.

To my amazement, Santa turned out to be another one of my uncles. In the midst of laughter from the grown-ups, a beardless and wet Santa handed out presents.

I got a pair of high-top lace-up boots with a pocket on the side for a Barlow knife, and a windup tractor with a tin-man driver—just the right gifts for a 6-year-old boy.

After saying “Thank you” for our gifts and playing a while, my cousins, my sister and I were ushered upstairs to bed. We all slept in one big feather bed, lying crosswise with chairs added at the foot of the bed to make more room. No one got cold.

In the morning, Grandpa told us to stay in bed until he rekindled the fires in the heating stove and kitchen range. We snuggled down and talked of things we received for Christmas. Soon, Mother called us to breakfast.

We hurried downstairs and, one by one, made a fast trip to the outdoor toilet and back. After washing our faces and hands in the tin wash pan, we tackled the delicious pancakes that Grandma was flipping on an iron griddle on the Home Comfort range.

For the rest of the morning, we played and listened to stories the men told about hardships of homesteading on the prairie.

Before long, we sat around the stretched-out table, gorging

ourselves on turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes with freshly churned butter, baked ham and all the trimmings.

Too soon, Dad said we needed to start home if we didn't want to do our chores in the dark.

Many years later, we still laugh when we remember the holiday when Santa's beard caught fire.

That was the last year there were lighted candles on Christmas trees at our grandparents' house.

—Ralph & Marie F., Leoti, Kansas