

The Richness of Youth

Pageant on poor side of town held wealth of Christmas Spirit.

The nighttime Christmas program at the Bethel Mission was the most anticipated winter event in the poor area of Freeport, Illinois known as the Organ Factory. It was especially so in the 1940s for the kids who didn't expect any gifts on Christmas Day.

On the night of one such program at Bethel, I cut through the empty lots behind my home, guided by the soft, yellow light streaming through the windows of the little clapboard-sided, one-room chapel.

The coal smoke curling up into the sky told me that Elsie had a fire started in the potbellied stove. The Baptist church downtown owned the building and paid Elsie to sweep out the church and get the stove started before Sunday school each week. She was paid only a dollar a week for her labor and the coal, but she returned 50¢ to the offering plate each Sunday.

Each year, we children offered our presentation of the first Christmas by putting on a pageant. The chapel's few decorations included a wreath on the door, a lit fir tree in a corner and red paper bells on the window shades.

As cast members, we wore simple costumes, mostly old Army blankets draped around our shoulders and head garb made to look like the sort worn by men in ancient Bethlehem.

A backdrop of folding screens, sheets and a few blankets created a stable setting. The Nativity scene and our production, however simple and disjointed, were always well received.

Sang in Exultation

After our biblical skit, an older neighborhood boy, Harold Sager, played the old upright piano as we sang Christmas carols. The

piano was out of tune and Harold, who had never taken any lessons, would hit a few “clunkers,” but we didn’t care as we sang out at the tops of our lungs.

The program came to a close when we softly sang Silent Night and said the parting prayer. As we left the rustic chapel, each of us was handed a brown paper bag and told, almost in a whisper, “Merry Christmas.”

The bags were gifts from the Baptist church members downtown. For many of the poorest kids in the Organ Factory, the bags were the only gifts they would get. Each sack contained a couple of apples and oranges, some nuts and hard candy, usually a small tree ornament and, in some years, a miniature doll or toy.

Thanking the lady who handed me a bag, I stepped out into the cold, moonlit air and started for home.

Before heading into our kitchen, I glanced back across the snowy fields and saw the lights go out in the Bethel Mission for another year. I caught sight of a shadowy figure crossing Brewster Street. It was Elsie hurrying back to her little family home, which was heated by a coal stove and lit with kerosene lamps.

Wishing Mom good night, I climbed the steps to the bedroom I shared with my brother. Lying in the darkened room, I smiled as I recalled the night’s events and softly hummed Christmas carols before drifting off to sleep.

I often think back to those childhood days when we were blissfully ignorant about the state of our lives, and when even the smallest kindness was deeply appreciated by the poor but cheerful kids who attended the little Bethel Mission.

—Richard S., Freeport, Illinois