

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Christmas Stories from “Long Ago”

Most of my early memories of the Stone Church are set in sunny, summer mornings. The traditional and inspirational services, together with distinctive sights, sounds and smells inside and out, will most certainly stay with me to the end.

So too will a decidedly different recollection, that of a much dimmer yet cozy evening at Christmas time. It's a bit blurred by the mists of many years, but I seem to remember a Christmas tree in the front. I was understandably a bit more concerned with what I think was my first Yuletide recitation. Would I remember my “piece,” brief as it was? Would it be scary standing up on the front steps in front of all those gathered for the occasion?

You must be aware of the fact that at that age we rarely left the farm, except to visit close relatives, and since we didn't start school until First Grade in the 1950s the outside world was still largely a mystery. But I needn't have worried—Mom was close by down at the front and all went well. A few years passed by and even though I was “much more worldly” by then (at least in regard to Houston) the walk up to the chancel steps at the seemingly cavernous new church was much longer and far more trepidatious. Somehow we always made it through, which was its own Christmas Blessing.

One very moving and meaningful memory at Cross of Christ is that of Maynard Nelson up in the balcony singing *Jeg er saa glad hver Julekveld* (I Am So Glad Each Christmas Eve). When the performance of that familiar and beloved hymn—one of the last verbal vestiges of our ethnic heritage—ceased to be a part of our congregation's Christmastime tradition, it truly was the end of an era. Much more than a traditional song of joyous celebration was lost to the ages.

Another Christmas story took place even before my grandparents were married. It involves a little girl from the upper reaches of Yucatan who grew up on one of two family farms across the old Yucatan road from each other. To the west lived Jørgen and Inger Vathing and to the east were the little girl's parents, John and Tilde Vathing. By now you must have figured out that the girl in the story was Gudrun Vathing Storlie, who was born in 1909.

She told of a Christmas service, early in her life, at our charming country church. I don't know if it was morning or evening, but the longstanding Norwegian tradition was to spend *Juleaften* (Christmas Eve) at home with the family, and go to church on *Juledagen* (Christmas Day).

It was also much nicer getting around in the winter during the day, back when everyone traveled in open sleighs (a.k.a. cutters) or more often in bobsleds. Those versatile farm implements consisting of a long, narrow, wooden box, mounted on two sets of heavy wood runners with thick iron rims, were pulled by a team of sturdy work horses.

To prepare for the long haul on a cold day a thick layer of straw was laid down in the box and warming stones were heated and placed in with the passengers, who were huddled together under

heavy blankets and “horse robes” (actual horse hides with the hair and mane left on, and a thick cloth lining on the back.) I have no idea how long the journey took, but a nine mile trip in the winter with horses was a real commitment back in those days.

As thankful as they were to finally reach their destination they must also have shared an appreciation for those thick stone walls that even the fiercest north winds could not penetrate. At that time they did have a furnace in the basement, but it has been said (depending on the outside temperature) that it wasn't always up to the task. We were told by the older ones that the custodian had to go out to the church on the Friday before services to start the fire, which had to be stoked at regular intervals, day and night, from then on until Sunday morning. This is where dedication was a necessity.

Upon entering the church they were met with a welcoming interior we probably wouldn't recognize today. Since this was before the big change of 1925 there were different pews, different floors, carpet, windows, lights and ceiling. The balcony extended down both sides of the sanctuary and the walls were boldly decorated.

Likewise the service would have been unrecognizable, or at the very least unintelligible, since it would have been delivered completely in Norwegian. The beloved and time-honored hymns were sung from the pocket-sized and often beautifully bound and personalized *Salmebøger* (Hymn books) that were brought along with them from home, and which contained only the words. That's one reason they needed a *kirkesanger* (“church singer,” i.e. song leader) in those early years.

Conducting the service our very first resident pastor, Rev. B. B. Ostrem, still young and somewhat recently ordained, may even have still worn the old style black robe and dramatic white *prestekrage* (ruffed or fluted collar). (What we wouldn't give to have a video of one of those services—*I wouldn't even care if it was black and white.*)

The center of attention was certainly the massive *Juletre* (Christmas tree). As tall as the altar piece, its branches seemed to envelop it. (See photo from 1910 on p. 29 of the 1980 Church History Book—although we have no way of knowing for sure if the tree was that big every year.) You can be sure the youngsters focused in on it right away and that leads us back to Gudrun's story.

Unlike today, there were presents under the tree which were handed out following the service. Little Gudrun was elated to receive a miniature tea set—the kind you used when entertaining your “wee dollies.” So precious was that gift she held it in her lap, clinging to it tightly with both hands. No matter how stiff and cold her hands became she was not about to let go of that tea set for the entire ride back up the long valley to her home.

I think most of us would agree that Christmas truly is “*the most wonderful time of the year!*” When we're children it's easy for many to believe our only concern is for the bright and shiny bounties of Christmas—gathering with family and friends, lots of really good food and special

treats, colored lights and decorations, the beautiful tree, and of course the presents under it. But growing up with church and Sunday school we were also well aware of the “Reason for the Season.”

Gudrun also grew up in the church and for much of her adult life lived very near it. She and her neighbor, Olga Torgerson, were very dedicated to the church and they came to be a force to be reckoned with for many years. (When I was young everyone knew who was in charge out at the Stone Church).

None of us know which memories of our childhood we’ll take with us throughout our lives, but we think it’s kind of sweet to think that Gudrun never forgot the treasured gift she took along home with her—a tangible reminder from that Christmas of long ago.

Glædlig Jul!

Merry Christmas!

Jim and Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, December 2017

P.S.-Memories wanted! We could keep going for some time with our own reminiscences and those we’ve heard from others over the years, but everyone has their own fond memories of Christmas and the church, which we’re hoping some of you will be willing to share. Please think about this as you prepare for the upcoming Holiday Season.