



OLD TYME CHRISTMAS MEMORIES & New Traditions in Athens

By Sally Smid

Perhaps the earliest local Christmas memories would be the annual events at the local one room schools that were often the hubs for rural communities. Students participated in programs that included the Nativity story, which was often re-enacted and it was a time of socializing with rural neighbours. Then there was the memorable ride home in a horse drawn sleigh, snuggled under a bear skin blanket.

One special memory at the old Athens Public School happened in Mrs. Katherine McLean's class when Santa stopped in for a visit. Students were taken aback when St. Nic kissed the teacher before departing. As it turned out "Santa" (a stand in for the real Santa) was actually her husband, Police Chief, Scotty McLean.

Seniors also recall how Christmas gifts were simple and often home made. Children in those days were thrilled with an orange and perhaps some pieces of candy in their stocking.

The Athens Lions Club and Fire Dept. have been long time hosts of Christmas parties. Santa arrives on the fire truck and kids, that are brave enough, climb onto his lap and relate their Christmas wishes, then receive a treat bag. There are still memories of how the orange caused the candy to stick together.

There are the stories of families going to area Christmas tree farms to find just the right tree to cut down and bring home. The smell of the pine and the snapping of cones on

the tree added magic to the holidays. Of course those trees are included in another tradition in Athens after Christmas, when the community enjoys a giant bonfire celebration near the rink.

Many local memories also relate to cultural traditions, which include the annual baking of fruit cakes at Maple View Lodge, Scottish shortbread, mincemeat tarts, or speculaas. Some Dutch immigrants have observed St. Nicolas Day on Dec. 5th when they would put out their wooden shoes or Klompen, hoping that Sinterklaas would fill them with pepernoten or droppies. Of course there was always the fear that if they weren't good Black Peter would put coal in their shoe or even carry them away in a sack! Christmas dinner

for many is not always on the 25th but most do get together for a traditional family meal and celebration. Old timers remember that family times did not include TV or computer games, but it was a chance to skate on a local pond or go sledding or tobogganing. Many local residents recall traveling through the area by horse drawn wagon or in cars to provide carols and cheer especially to any housebound neighbours.

Today there are many newer traditions that include lighted night time Christmas parades. Athens is proud to have hosted the first "Parade of Lights" in the area which is still sponsored by Howards Buslines. Lighted floats, walkers, and carriages parade down the main street to the hum of generators and festive music. Free hot chocolate is provided along with a party following at Howards' garage.

There are many other various Christmas lighting traditions in the area. Perhaps the largest is in Delta Park where area residents are invited to take a wagon ride or walk through the park and experience a massive display that includes 80,000 lights. The event is in its eleventh year and takes place on Saturdays starting at the end of November and includes meals at the local United Church. A breath taking sight each year would also be the Delta Mill that has lit candles in each window during the Christmas season. Then there is the now traditional star on top of the 90 ft. tall Smid silo near Athens which can be seen for miles. Twins Ken and Chris Smid first designed and installed it 20 years ago. It is now timed to convert into a cross as well, proclaiming as the family describes, "the entire meaning of the holiday". In that regard, Christmas Eve mass is also an important part of the holiday for many and there are a variety of candle light services and choirs in churches as well.

It is also the season for the Christmas Hamper program, organized by the local Food Bank, which helps the less fortunate in the area to have Christmas. A Community Christmas Day Dinner has been organized by a local committee. It is intended for anyone who might be alone or would like to be part of a community celebration. The holidays can be especially difficult for those who can't be with family, suffer from depression, or have low incomes.

With all of the busyness and commercialism that goes on at Christmas, it is heart warming to find that there are still ways in which the true meaning of the holiday is evident. After all, what better way to honour the Christ Child on his Birthday than by giving to others. **LH**



Left Page: Local Christmas Dinner in 1924; Top: Santa Spreads Cheer at Athens Community Dinner, Middle: Christmas Star on Smid Silo, Bottom: Sinterklass (Saint Nicolas) arrives on a horse alongside Black Peter in Parade of Lights