

REVISITING CHRISTMAS PAST AT NEW HORIZONS

by Marie Coady

The automatic doors of New Horizons Retirement Home clicked open to reveal a cluster of brightly lit sitting rooms dotted with comfortable couches and twinkling with the spirit of Christmas present. But I had come in search of Christmas past.

My quest turned fruitful when I was introduced to Elise McGann, Louise Carpenter Hennessy and Muriel Salter. These three intelligent, articulate women graciously agreed to share their childhood Christmas experiences with me.

Elise McGann was born in Woburn in 1919 within view of New Horizon's front doors. Of course, in 1919, New Horizons was the Choate Hospital, but Elise finds great comfort in having returned to the spot where so many of her youthful memories are trapped in time.

Elise's childhood home was on the hill in front of New Horizons and had a clear view all the way down to the Armory. In between were the gentle slopes of the Dow Estate where she rolled in sweet grass and rode the hay wagons. When the hay was piled, what seemed a mile high to a small child, Elise would join with the other neighborhood children jumping into the soft, sweet-smelling stacks and rolling down their sides till they were so covered with hay they would look like scarecrows.

Elise's first memory of Christmas was the annual trip to Lyceum Hall, then located on Main Street in Woburn Center near where CVS is now.

"Each year, as I recall, any child in the city could go to the Lyceum on a Saturday before Christmas, and they would have a Punch "n Judy puppet show and a Santa Claus. At the end of the program, they gave each child a bag of hard Christmas candy and an orange"

Once Elise mentioned the orange, a discussion began as to the significance of the orange. It seems everyone remembers finding that orange in their Christmas stocking every year. It was decided the orange was a symbol of affluence. There was a time when having fruit in the middle of winter was the height of luxury.

"We were glad to get it," Muriel Salter said firmly. Although Muriel was born in Woburn in 1900, her family moved west to Colorado when she was only three. She remembers not only being poor but isolated.

“If you had to go anywhere you had to walk,” Muriel reminisced. “It was many miles to town. One day my mother went to town to shop for Christmas. But a blizzard came up suddenly, and we thought we would never see her again. The next day she came out of the snow loaded down with a gift for each of us. Mine was a doll cradle with a mattress that was too big. My father cut it down to fit. My brother got a pair of shoes and he was glad to get them.”

Muriel is the oldest person at New Horizons, but you’d never know it to talk to her. She’s not only interesting but interested and eager to learn something new. “One Christmas,” Muriel said, “oh, I think my brother was about fourteen, and he thought he’d brighten up the Christmas tree. He lit some candles and stuck them on the tree. Unfortunately, he forgot about them, and they set the cabin on fire. My father wasn’t very happy.”

Muriel came back East when she was twelve and settled in Medford. She said moving to Medford was a blessing, because she didn’t have to worry about Indians and coyotes anymore.

Just as Muriel was making her way back East, Louise Carpenter Hennessy was born---1912 to be exact. Like many local youths, Louise grew up poor. “My mother had been widowed with four young children,” Louise explained.

Louise’s Christmases would seem somewhat bleak to a child of the nineties, but she has no bad memories. She also remembered the Christmas Party at Lyceum Hall and the fact that no one had Christmas lights decorating their home. “We didn’t have electricity so there weren’t the kind of Christmas decorations you have now. If you wanted to see houses decorated and lit up, you had to go to Winchester. They were the only ones who could afford to decorate.

”We had been chatting for over 90 minutes, but it seemed like only seconds. Yet it was time to end our discussion, because there was a birthday celebration in the front parlor.

Elise McGann offered to see me out. We strolled down the long hall to the front parlor, chatting as we went. There I offered my thanks to her for her help, and we parted. I hope to see Elise again. She’s a fine lady, and I know she’d make a good friend. Unfortunately, our friendship was a short one as Elise passed away the in 1999. And she is missed.

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