

4-23-97

Christmas in Portland

Several neighborhood boys and girls served as a welcoming committee when Paul and I moved into our first house. The actual moving had been the easiest we were ever to experience. I don't remember how we transported our clothes, kitchen goods, and a few books and records from our apartment to our new home. We probably could have done so on the bus and streetcar we had so little to move.

There were four and sometimes five boys and girls whose ages ranged from about eight to around eleven. I don't remember any of their names, but their personalities and bright appearance are a prominent part of my very pleasant memories of our rented house in Portland.

The house was completely furnished except for the pots and pans in the kitchen. The owners had moved from Portland to flee the unhappy memories of their daughter's death in the house. The wood-burning furnace took some getting used to, but that minor inconvenience was more than compensated for by the upright piano and the working fireplace in the living room, as well as the novelty of a trash-burner, an integral part of the electric range in the kitchen. We felt we were living luxuriously in that three-bedroom house, set among giant camellia bushes in the front and a Queen Anne cherry tree in the back - all at little more rent than we'd been paying for our cramped efficiency apartment.



We moved in during summer vacation of the neighborhood children who dutifully called on me the first morning after Paul went off to work. The boys and girls began dropping in for an occasional brief visit. I enjoyed their chatter and was always glad to see them. After school started in the fall, I didn't see quite so much of them, but they still dropped in on an occasional Saturday morning.

A couple of weeks before Christmas Paul and I brought home and trimmed our first tree with a single string of lights and a few ornaments, supplemented by some homemade decorations, such as bright construction paper chains and tin can ends fringed to reflect the lights. We were immensely proud of our tree, and looked forward to establishing our own Christmas routines. We began bringing in and wrapping gifts for each other, as well as gifts to ship home to family. We made a great show of "hiding" the gifts from each other, planning to put them triumphantly under the tree on Christmas Eve.

On the first week day the boys and girls were free for their Christmas vacation, they came to see me. I showed them the festive living room with its tree and decorations and was surprised at the quietness with which they viewed the tree. Usually, they were more spontaneous and vocal in their reactions to whatever we talked about. Suddenly, they left with hardly a goodbye. I was a bit puzzled but thought they must have many holiday activities of their own.

The most unusual object in the house was a large, elaborate copper and brass Russian samovar on its own table in the dining room. I had been working with that samovar, cleaning it, and making sure I knew how to operate it, for we intended having it as the centerpiece of a party we were planning for friends the Saturday before Christmas. By the time I had completed work with the samovar, the doorbell rang; the children were back. They were more excited than I had ever seen them. One boy lingered at the back of the group with his hands behind his back. They made me close my eyes while they led me back into the living room. When I opened them, I saw a package under the tree, awkwardly wrapped with many wrinkles and gaps in the Christmas paper. They yelled "Merry Christmas" and warned me not to open the package until Christmas morning. The youngest girl confided in me, over the objections of the rest, that they felt sorry for our tree without any packages under it, and wanted Paul and me to have a happy Christmas. I enlisted their help in bringing to the tree the gifts I had wrapped for Paul and the ones almost ready to be mailed to family and friends. They were intrigued with the possible contents of some of Paul's gifts, and I told them about the silly items which were to become a staple of our gift exchange - such items as a ball of twine, a bottle of shoe polish, and a package of five silver dollars I'd saved from my change. (Silver dollars were not unusual in Portland during those war years.) After exclaiming over the more festive appearance of our tree, they all filed out to continue their activities up and down the block.

On Christmas morning, Paul and I opened their gift, a pyrex casserole with lid. No wonder their wrapping was wrinkled! It was an unwieldy shape to wrap, but it was a wonderful gift, a dish we didn't have and one I've used with great pleasure, always remembering the youngsters who were imbued with a real spirit of Christmas, feeling that our tree needed a gift. The dish has traveled with us in our many moves across the country, and I still use it, perpetuating my happy memories of those generous, thoughtful boys and girls.