

## Memories of Christmas Past by Ernie Bies November 2011

My wife is working on our Christmas letter and asked me for some input about events over the last year. I tossed her a few ideas and then scanned my Ottawa Senators calendar for significant events that I had noted for 2011. Apparently doctor's appointments and furnace cleaning were not what she had in mind.

It got me thinking about some past Christmases. We lived in Bradlo, a small Slovak community about 10 miles south of Hearst Ontario. I remember as a very



small boy back in the late 1940s when my mother would do her Christmas baking and she would send



us to bring treats to the old bachelors living on Bradlo Road. The fresh poppy seed rolls (Makovnik), walnut rolls (Orechovnik) and cottage cheese (Cirovnik) pastries would bring tears to the eyes of old

Ukrainian Tony Gulka, (on left), Slovak Matt Marcinak (below) and a few others. They would give us nickels, hard candy and apples in exchange



In those days there were never a lot of presents under our tree. My oldest sister Olga began her teaching career in 1951 and would always ensure that we all had special gifts. One memorable Christmas in 1954, she was teaching in Nicaragua but through her friend Mrs. Pellow and sister Anne she sent clothes for John and Rudy, a Daisy air rifle for Bill, a beautiful doll for Martha and a pair of cap pistols with holsters for me.



We also always looked forward to our Christmas box from Uncle Mike and Aunt Catherine. They were both former Bradlo residents where Uncle Mike had the neighbouring homestead till he married the school teacher, Catherine O'Hara, and they moved to Sudbury.

Those events, delivering pastries to lonely bachelors and waiting for the post office to deliver the boxes of special gifts, served to instil a sense of community service in all of us as we grew up. There were many ways to help out such as volunteering at dinners, providing rides, donating goods and services or simply adding an extra plate to the table.

Sometimes this can lead to interesting situations. When living in Edmonton back in the late 70s I would volunteer with Santa's Helpers in delivering Christmas baskets to families in need. Being a big fellow I was given the 98th Street deliveries, a rough part of town in those days. I had the old blue Maverick loaded to the gills

with bags of gifts and goodies. The children receiving the gifts would be waiting at the door in anticipation and they did not wait until Christmas to tear open their gifts. One interesting family were recent immigrants from Poland who were taking English language training while awaiting job placement. They were both professionals and their names were on the welfare list as they were receiving temporary assistance. Since many Eastern Europeans can understand each other's language I attempted to explain in Slovak that these were welcoming gifts from the city. They were astounded that the city would think of them at this time and I'm sure became very productive citizens.

One night I was trying to do my last delivery and could not get the people to come to the door. I could see a light on upstairs so went into the back yard to try the back door. This timid man finally came to the door and only opened it enough to get the gift bag through. Thinking that was kind of strange I drove home down 98th St and noticed several police cars with lights flashing and Policemen going door to door on both sides of the street. The next morning I heard on the news that a drunken card party ended in a free for all with two people stabbed to death and the killer on the loose. My wife officially retired me from driving on the spot.

Another memory from Edmonton relates to the family gift exchange that large families rely on to ensure everyone gets a decent gift. I had brother Bill's name and sent him a whole case of Kraft Dinner to Oshawa by rail. He was so happy to get it he phoned me at eight in the morning Eastern time forgetting that we were two

hours earlier out West. Needless to say that case of Kraft Dinner was a big hit with his three kids and did not last until Easter in keeping with a sign I had sent him a couple of years earlier which stated "When you're out of Kraft Dinner, You're out of food."



Everyone from Northern Ontario has stories about the drive home on snow covered roads at Christmas time. The frozen gas lines, white knuckle driving and potential moose encounters did not deter anyone from making the trek from Toronto or Ottawa to Hearst which took about 12 hours if you were lucky. We could not

afford the luxury of staying at a motel to break up the trip and in any event were anxious to get home for Christmas. We all had familiar stopping places, like the Highway Bookshop in Cobalt and the Husky in Cochrane, where we'd take a break and often run into family and friends. One particular year in the early 1970s stands out as it involved several family members coming from different places at different times but sharing similar experiences. My wife and I had set out from Ottawa on Dec 23 but hit heavy snow after North Bay and found ourselves driving through 10 inch ruts and no snow plow in sight. We gamely tried to get through but at Matheson realized that we'd have to stop as it was getting dark and dangerous. Luckily the Bel Air Motel had a room for us and we were able to spend a pleasant evening visiting with Eric Vehkalahti, an old school chum from Hearst now living in Matheson. The next morning we got a late start and continued on our trip. Halfway to Cochrane we saw a car in the snow bank and automatically pulled over to help, as any northerner would. To my surprise my sister Martha stepped out of the car. She and her husband Brian were coming from Toronto and found a patch of black ice that introduced them to a northern snow bank. There was a brisk wind blowing and we could not stand on the road as the wind would actually move us as though we were on skates. With a bit of shovelling and pushing we had them back on the road and we were soon sitting at the Husky in Cochrane, marvelling at the coincidence. We got to Hearst without further incident but found that brother Rudy and his family had not yet arrived and heard that another snow storm was underway and the highway was about to be closed. Later that day Rudy phoned from Matheson where he was stranded at the Kiss Motel. Adding to the coincidence, a dentist from Hearst, Dr. Vavra and his wife, were also stranded at the same motel. They were fellow Slovaks heading south for the holidays. Fortunately one of the gifts Rudy was bearing was a bottle of Slivovica so the Slovaks from Hearst were able to spend a truly memorable Christmas Eve and reached their destinations safely the next day.



Hope you all have good memories of Christmas past and many more to come.

Ernie Bies

Ottawa, Ontario, November 2011