

❧ From "A Time Gone By" ❧
by Hertha Gjerloff Olson



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Christmas meant a lot of hard work when I was a child; I mean work, not the shopping and wrapping and wishing that may have been part of your Christmas; it wasn't part of ours. It was strictly a time of giving to others the things we had and could make out of what we had . . . The actual work must have begun about a week before Christmas Eve; that was the date my father made the deliveries. Let me tell you what he delivered, and to whom.

There were fat geese, ducks and chickens dressed, ready to roast, oblong rolls of bright yellow butter weighing from three to five pounds each; each marked with diagonal gashes across the top made by the wooden paddle used to work the whey out of the butter. There were loaves of rye bread about fourteen inches long, six inches in diameter baked in round covered black tins; jars of thick cream, eggs and pork roasts filled out the largess. The to-whoms were the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker of our town and community, the banker, the preacher, the doctor, the postmaster, anyone and everyone who had touched our lives during the past year and anyone who was in need.

Do you have any idea how much work it took to make ready these gifts? . . . Let's start with the geese which had been raised in our barnyard. First you got out the washing boiler; you put it on the front two lids of the range, then you pumped water from the cistern to fill it, ten to fifteen gallons. Meanwhile the geese had been decapitated and brought into the kitchen. When the water boiled the geese were plunged into it and poked down with a wooden stick to be sure the water got under every feather. Then they were taken out dripping, hot and smelly and wrapped in a rug to steam. In about fifteen minutes we were set to work plucking them, saving all but the coarsest feathers for pillows. Then mother gutted them and they were put on the back porch to freeze until time to wrap them; they were beautifully white and clean, ready to roast (we hoped with prunes, apples and onions stuffed into them). Ducks and chickens were dressed in the same way but the chickens required less steaming time.

Have you ever churned butter? First the thick cream that has come from the separator in the barn (by the way, have you ever washed a cream separator? If not you have missed one of farm-life's most onerous tasks). The cream had to be soured a little; it helped considerably to have it at the right temperature, which we did by a guess and by

golly method. The cream went into the maw of a wooden churn which was certainly larger than a bread box but smaller than a wash tub, with four wooden paddles on the inside and a crank on the outside. The churn was placed in the kitchen sink and we took turns cranking it; sometimes the butter came too soon, not so good quality, sometimes it took forever. Finally a clump, clump, splash was heard and we knew the butter was in the second stage of production. Next the clumps were lifted out into a wooden bowl and the working began; salt was added, worked out, added again, finally the oblong rolls that would soon belong to someone else were formed and wrapped in wax paper (what a boon Saran wrap and aluminum foil would have been to say nothing about paper towels). The rolls were placed on the back porch along with the geese.

All the time baking was in progress, the rye bread baking. What exact recipe mother used I know not; I doubt she used one. Since those days I have baked lots of rye bread, but from a recipe given me by a darling little German baker, Rudolph Prinz. "Take" he said "6 cups of rye graham flour, 3 cups of white flour, 3 tablespoons of fat, 3 tablespoons of sugar and 3 tablespoons of salt, put them in a big bowl and work them together with your fingers until the mixture is crumbly. Dissolve 2 packages of yeast in 3 cups of warm water or milk and mix it into the flour. Mix and knead it well. It takes a lot of energy to knead this bread. Let it rise, knead it again and bake it." So efficient was Rudolph Prinz that he could take a loaf in each hand, kneading the two at the same time. This is essentially the way mother did her rye bread; when it came out of the black interior of the range it was fragrant and crusty; it was good bread.

So, when the 24th arrived the food was wrapped in Christmas paper and loaded into the Ford for delivery. What couldn't be delivered had been mailed earlier. I believe the joy it gave daddy to deliver the gifts made up to mother to some extent for the hard work.

After daddy was off on his Kris Kringle trip we went to work to clean the house and prepare our Christmas dinner. Surprisingly, one goose was left which went into the oven properly stuffed with prunes, apples and onions.

Mother had some red drapes; she put them up after the house was put in order; then one of us was sent out to get a cedar branch which was laid on the back of the heating stove to fill the house with pungent fragrance.

Other good things were prepared for our dinner and when we finally sat down to eat it was to a festive meal and in a "God bless us everyone" atmosphere. Mother was a fabulous cook.

If I were writing a biography I would tell you that not only was she a fabulous cook, she was educated, talented, a community servant, involved in politics and a devout Christian; she was petite and pretty, cheerful and a friend to everyone, but this story is about Christmas Past. Daddy was a noble man; he loved his family and his fellow man.



Jennie Feddersen Gjerloff



Carl Hoffmann Gjerloff

I don't think either of them had a venial sin to answer for when they were admitted into the Great Beyond.

When daddy came back he often brought return gifts, boxes of candy, a bushel of apples, or some similar gift. If all had gone well there was Grandma's box. The gifts in this box were the only wrapped gifts I can remember. Sometimes mother would bring out things she had bought, but not wrapped, mittens, caps, something useful. When the snow lay deep on the roads and the mail couldn't be delivered to our rural box, sadness prevailed in the household. I remember times when "The Box" was left at a neighbors several miles away because that was as close as the mailman could get; then daddy would hitch up a team and plow his way through to get it. Daddy was so tender-hearted he couldn't bear to have us disappointed if it was within his power to prevent it.

After dinner when the box had been opened, or it hadn't come, came the big moment of placing the long distance call to Omaha to Bestemor (Grandma Gjerloff). Long distance calls were only used for ultra-important messages and this Christmas Eve call was a major event. We all had to be quiet while the Glaedelig Juls, the Merry Christmases, and the thank yous for what had been given and received were said.

There was another big job that preceded Christmas, the writing of Christmas cards. In those days cards were dated (e.g. Christmas 1915) so there was no possibility of using any left over from a previous year to avert the calamity of running out of cards. I wonder what they would have thought of paying a dollar for a card and twenty cents postage the way we do now (I don't think too much of it myself). Thought went into each card, and a message. Daddy wrote in beautiful script, slowly and carefully. The cards that were received were appreciated, too; I have seen daddy, when a card came from someone that had been missed on their list, holding the card, tears in his eyes, saying "but we didn't send them one."

Sometimes after Grandma and Grandpa

Feddersen moved to Marquette, one half mile south and three miles east of where we lived on the Platte River, we would go there for Juleaften (Christmas Eve). There would be a festive meal, with rice to begin with. In one bowl was an almond and the person who found the almond in his bowl received a little gift; the almond always showed up in the bowl of the youngest child. The rice had a generous pat of butter in the middle of it, and by each place was a small bowl of wine; we took a spoonful of rice, dipped it into the bowl of wine and consumed them together; it was good. Then the roast goose which I'm sure fulfilled its destiny by way of our boiler and rug treatment, and whatever else it took to fill out a good Danish dinner.

. . . After the Christmas dinner every speck of cleaning up had to be done, even to polishing the already shining range top with newspaper. Then, and only then, could we have our Christmas tree which was in the library; there was usually a little gift for everyone.

Why has this ghost of Christmas past risen up today to cause this sadness that has come upon me? I don't know. I think of mother and daddy, surely two of God's choicest children, and wish they could have had it better and nicer, but how would I have wanted Christmas to be for them, for all of us? I don't know that either. At that time I had no frame of reference, no TV to show me what others had, or could buy, no radio with carols and commercials about the glittering world of things. I have created inner turmoil for myself by writing this but it came upon me and clamored for expression.

The hymn line "to all the saints who from their labors rest" comes to me loud and clear; I believe these two special saints are resting from the labor as we knew it, but not sitting idly doing nothing. I believe they are still doing for others, only I hope they aren't plucking geese or churning butter this Christmas, unless they want to, of course. If they are I expect the geese will pluck easily and the cream will be just the right temperature.



Gjerloff family gathering in dining room of Kay and Meta Gjerloff home northeast of Aurora. Seated in center is Kay; to his left is his brother, Carl, and to his right is a neighbor, Nellie Swartzendruber, then Meta and Jennie.