

Wonder of Christmas past

The following was written by Tundra Times founder Howard Rock about his early days and what Christmas meant to him. The article was published in the Dec. 23, 1963 Tundra Times.

During this writer's boyhood in the village of Point Hope, Christmas had already become part of the way of life. No trees were available in that part of the country. To remedy what might have been a treeless Christmas, Saint Thomas Mission of the Episcopal church, sent for trees made out of pliable metal.

One of the most pleasant memories of decorations that adorned the tree in those days was popcorn strung

on long thread. It was amusing to watch the young ladies string popcorn with needle and thread while taking an occasional bite.

Tinsel, bright colored bulbs and candles completed the decoration of the tree. It was, indeed, a wonder of the world to children who had never seen a tree in their lives. To them the tree became a symbol of Christmas. Some secretly wished that they could see a real tree.

Little programs had been introduced as part of the observance of Christmas. One unforgettable bit this writer will never forget was when he was taught to mem-

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Wonder of Christmas

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orize a nursery rhyme that was to be recited before almost every member of the village population.

The people had crowded into a large hall for the feast but before it started, a little program was performed. He does not remember what the rest of the program was about, but he does remember his part.

People had sat down on the floor. When his turn came, he was placed on the floor in front of the audience. He began to recite the nursery rhyme, and right in the middle of it someone in the audience said in a loud voice, "We can't see him!"

There was a flurry of activity and somebody produced a wooden box. The writer was lifted bodily onto the box and told to recite the rhyme once again.

The hall became very quiet. One could have heard a caribou hair drop. He began:

"Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner
Eating his Christmas pie.
He put out his thumb
And pulled out a plum
And said, 'What a good boy am I.'"

The hall broke into loud applause mingled with proud laughter. It half scared the performer. His mother rushed forward and lifted him in her arms and said tenderly, "I'm very proud of you, son."

To the children of the village, Santa Claus, of course, was a very mysterious being. They began to learn to visualize him as the happiest little old man. When he laughed, which he did all the time, his belly "shook like a bowl full of jelly," although they didn't have any idea what jelly was. They just knew his belly shook when he laughed.

He gave nice presents away when you're a good little Eskimo boy or girl. He knew all about it when you're not a good boy or girl. Around Christmas time, it is doubtful that there was a bad girl or a bad boy in the whole village.

The way Santa travelled was something out of this world. Being familiar with reindeer, some of the little Eskimo children couldn't quite imagine Santa driving them across the sky. But since he was Santa Claus, he did it just the same. The little old man could do anything as he sailed across the sky happily shouting, "MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT!"

This writer was distressed when he found out that Santa came down chimneys. We didn't have a chimney in our house. No one had chimneys in the whole village except the school and some Mission buildings and there were no children in any of them. Would Santa go to the school and the Mission buildings and leave no presents to the children of the village?

No chimney! What a distressing situation. All we had in the house was a stove pipe and the door of the Arctic stove was so small. Besides the oven chamber was in the way. How would Santa come out through all this? If he could go through the stove pipe, he would probably have to squeeze through and get his white beard and hair all sooty. If he can go through all this, he must be a very small old man.

But early the next morning, they were -- a brand new pair of little overalls with a cotton shirt to match. Santa was there all right. Looking at the stove pipe, he wondered, "How could he come through such a small stove pipe?"

After he put the new clothes on, he looked at them
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"I love you Santa"

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over and over again. He asked his mother whether he could show them to his cousins and she said he could. He ran and entered the sod igloo and said excitedly, "Look what Santa brought me last night!"

On his way back home, he ran and looked at his new clothes by turns and then murmured, "I love you, Santa Claus."