

Christmas in Arctic Village

By Lincoln Tritt

Christmases before boarding schools were the Christmases in my life. It was like disrupting a dream of "sugarplums dancing in your head." Our parents made sure we made memories of those times.

Christmas in Arctic Village started about Dec. 10th. The drowsiness of the long winter nights in the village began to stir: the first serious hunt, the first load of wood and the first stitching of the needle. Holiday preparations were as much a part of the celebrations and excitement as were the actual dates.

We children first gathered in the church in preparation for the Christmas programs. All the women were busy making new dancing boots, slippers or calf-skin boots for everybody in their family. All the new clothes were ordered from Sears or Montgomery Wards catalogs. Everything we wore had to be new. After all, this was a very special holiday.

The men would be busy getting wood for the church and the dance hall to last until after New Year's. The gathering of food was very intense, since celebrations imply food. In earlier times when people were living in separate settlements for their hunting and gathering, they would all come together during the Christmas holidays to celebrate. In the cold, dark days of the northern winters, celebrations were very important.

Christmas trees were hunted down and decorated and tempting packages were placed around them. I remember one Christmas in Fort Yukon when we decorated our tree with candies. It is hard to remember if it was a celebration or torture. Being kids with a yearning for sweets, this was very tempting, but we held on.

The trees in the church and the dance hall were decorated and helping with these activities was a privilege for us. Most of all, there was a sense of togetherness. People

were too busy and dependent on each other for anything else. Smiles were everywhere and the radios were starting to play "Silver Bells" and "Winter Wonderland."

About a week before Christ-

and open them. Before midnight there would be a church service. At midnight, Christmas would be announced with a volley of rifle fire and people would go to each house and shake hands and wish each other a "Merry Christmas."

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mas, we would have school programs and put on a show. It was probably the only time of the school year when we were all clean and neat and on our best behavior, but as children, clean and neat and fun just don't seem to go together. Even this did not dampen the Christmas spirits.

On Christmas Eve, we would have our church Christmas program, usually the Nativity. After Santa and his elves passed out the presents, we would all go home

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This was the time of the year for children we could get away with things we normally wouldn't get permission for, like staying overnight, wherever we dropped off to sleep. We would try to stay up all night, usually at the place where the potlatch would be and sometimes run errands.

I don't know if they ever planned it, but starting early the next morning, from the village's outer edge, one household would wake up their neighbors with a lot of noise, from empty gas cans or rifle fire, and wish them Merry

Christmas. And with that family joining them, they would go on to the next house, until all the houses were visited. The last household would be hosting a potlatch.

Compared to the ruckus of New Year's these Christmas morning jublations were very mild.

After breakfast and church, the preparation for the evening meal would start and all the ones who weren't helping would try to catch up on their sleep, including us. If you were not sleeping, you

would be in the way.

After the evening meal, we danced until the sun came up in the morning, which in the winter is around 7 or 8 in the morning. Then it's sleep until about 4 p.m., eat and dance again. I don't remember anyone ever staying home from these dances. This was pretty much the routine until after New Year's except that New Year's celebrations were even more intense. Since all the people were in top physical condition, it got pretty rough.

The closeness of people, who were of one mind and spirit, was what made these holidays very special for all of us. At the time we still didn't know much about the concept of "me." I guess celebrating with everybody is a lot more fun than celebrating by yourself. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

(Editor's Note: Lincoln Tritt is a Gwitchin writer and lecturer.)