

# Christmas in Tyonek

By PHYLLIS CARLSON

The Christmas days we remember most vividly are not the ones where everything goes smoothly, when money is plentiful and stores are convenient. The Christmas that really stands out in our memory is the one that forced us to use our ingenuity and imagination, when we had to make everything our-

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selves, from the Christmas decorations to the Christmas goodies, including Christmas presents. For instance, that Christmas in Tyonek, forty-four years ago, when I was teacher there.

Money had never been plentiful in the village, but this Christmas we were in the depths of the Great Depression, and a government C.C.C. project was the only source of income for the village. Even if there had been money, there were no shops within many miles. We were all determined to have a Christmas, however, and a good one.

Decorations? Simple! We had construction paper, didn't we? When we ran out of red and green paper, we used crayons to color more. We made paper chains, bells and cornucopias. We flattened tin cans and with tin snips cut out stars that shone and twinkled as brightly as any boughten ones.

Dried popcorn was in our winter supplies; we popped a

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dishpan full and strung them, one fun filled afternoon. We even had enough to make some popcorn balls. Some of us had picked wild cranberries in the fall, and cheerful red strings of berries joined the white popcorn garlands. The Christmas decoration problem was solved, we felt, as we looked with great satisfaction at our handwork.

In our winter supplies, too, brought down before ice choked the Inlet, was a turkey, kept frozen ever since in the outside cache. When we discovered that very few of the villagers had ever tasted turkey, we racked our brains to figure out a way to give everyone in the village a taste, at least. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes seemed to be called for: how could we divide a twenty pound bird among one hundred and twenty or so people? Our solution was simple. We decided to roast Mr. Turkey, and make turkey sandwiches- sliced thin, we figured, mathematically, we could do it!

Christmas candy was another problem. Store bought sweets was a great and very infrequent treat to the children- they had never puzzled out how it got on their shelves. To make it themselves was unheard of! Their eyes widened and their mouths fell open when I proposed it. Ten year old Laura remarked in awe,

"Teacher must be like God- she can make candy!"

Soon all the girls has the opportunity to be "god-like" themselves, when Polly, Jane, Catherine, Olga, Laura and the others gathered in my kitchen, and the sweet smell of boiling fudge and

panacha filled the air. One evening we pulled taffy and a sticky good time was had by all.

The women of the village met one afternoon to decide on the Christmas refreshments. Russian pie, they finally decided, would be the main dish, for there was plenty of dried fish in the village, and the fish and rice dish was a favorite. I volunteered to be responsible for the turkey sandwiches if some of the good bakers would bake the bread. We scheduled some Christmas cookie baking sessions, too. The big, old ice cream freezer that belonged to the school was to be put to good use, and there was no lack of willing hands to turn the handle when the time came.

There were still presents to be provided. Here, true inventiveness was revealed, for we had to make do with the materials available to us. The women, good sewers and knitters, had it easier than the men, for there was cloth and yarn available. It was then, the men showed their true ingenuity, and when Christmas finally arrived, the puzzle of the disappearing Mercurochrome at last was solved- but we has to wait until Christmas to find the answer to our mystery.

Yes, Christmas finally arrived. The big spruce tree filled one corner of the school room, and was bravely decorated with our paper chains, pop corn and cranberry ropes. The tin stars bravely glittered in the light of the gasoline lamps. Around the tree and in the branches were the presents we had labored on. They made a goody show. And- heaped around the tree were pair after pair of childrens snow shoes that the men had been working

on. And, they were dyed the most luscious, orangy red you can imagine! Yes our store of Mercurochrome was depleted- villagers had been coming to the dispensary every day for bottles of it we made up on request. Now, they would have to use the antiseptic that "stung", but when we saw the joyful faces of the children as they looked at their very own snowshoes, we could only feel happy for them!

As for myself, one of the most appreciated presents I ever received was under the tree. Some time before, Eli, one of the oldest men in the village had dug up a crude, old, stone ax head in his garden. I knew that a traveling B.I.A. official had offered him a substantial sum for it, which he refused. Yet, here under our Christmas tree it was, simply labelled, "for teacher."

Yes, it was truly a memorable Christmas - a four star Christmas, and one that has never been forgotten.