

Christmas Memories from Shearstown, 1925

Sister Ann Amin

Let's go back you and I, to a Christmas many years ago in a little valley called Shearstown.

There had been a heavy snowfall and the children were having one last bit of fun before Mom called them for supper. In those days there were no electric lights or cars, but oh how beautiful the valley looked as one by one the lamps were lit in the snug little houses that nestled on each side of the banks of the singing brook that ran clear through the valley. Most everyone had a stable where a few sheep, a few goats, a cow and a horse were kept. Just before Christmas they would kill a cow or a sheep or a couple of chickens. The cow would be cut up in nice large chunks and the horse would be hooked up to the sleigh and off they would go from house to house with the meat. For one dollar you would get a nice big roast. The widows in the valley got one free.

The women had been busy for days. I had the job of greasing the big black iron pots. There were light cakes and dark cakes and I got to lick the mixing bowl. Then there was the bread - oh, what bread - white with caraway seeds and brown with raisins and cinnamon. Mother used our own eggs and butter.

Then there was the hot plum pudding. Mother let me hold the pudding bag. She kept it very clean, put away in the pantry for this special time. She served it with a delicious almond flavoured sauce made with brown sugar and large blue raisins.

As I sit here in my humble home tonight, I close my eyes and see my mother with a small brush leaning over a basin of water scrubbing her hands before putting them in the mixing bowl. Mother had everything spotlessly clean, even the doorstep leading out into the yard was scrubbed every week with Sunlight soap.

The snow was hard and noisy. Many would hitch up the horse and sleigh and go for a ride down over the pond before Christmas dinner. What a sight to behold as the horses trotted over the hard frozen ice with a sleigh full of children singing and laughing. As we all gathered around the table we would sing Grace. Then Mother would fill our plates. But before Mother sat down to eat with us she would fix a plate of dinner for a nice old man who always went by our house.

Oh yes, then there was our stockings still hanging by the chimney, almost empty by now. Down in my tummy was the apple, orange and grapes that I had found in my stocking earlier. Also hidden in the toe of my stocking I had found a thimble, thread and darning needle. Mother wanted her little daughter to learn how to sew.



Then at night came the jannies. Everyone who could play a fiddle or mouth organ or accordion would dress up in such a way no one would ever know them. They would all go together from house to house playing and singing for a cup of clingy and a piece of cake. They loved mother's cakes for they would just play and play for more cake.

Oh how precious are these memories tonight as I sit here by my kitchen table going back down memory lane.

Yes, we gave gifts to each other - a new handmade sweater, a cap and mitts, a suit of hand knitted underwear, a pair of warm stockings. But these gifts were made in love. The wool for these gifts came from our own sheep.



Mother started to poke up the fire. It was time for our evening prayer around her knee. She turned up the lamp, took her Bible down from the Bible shelf and we got our little benches and sat close to her. The fire from the large grate shone out on Mother's beautiful handmade mats that covered the kitchen floor.

Jack Frost had painted some beautiful pictures on both kitchen windows.

Mother read the glorious story of the Birth of Jesus. Then we all prayed and off we went up the stairs, half asleep by now and as we sank down in the nice, soft, warm, feather mattress where Mother had put a nice, hot brick hours before.

I found that I was still holding on tightly to a big brown peppermint candy. When I awoke the next morning my hand was full of soft brown sugar and stuck to my old-fashioned flannel nightgown. I had some job cleaning it without Mother's knowing.

How precious are those memories.

Yes, the stables are gone, the homestead is gone, the loving hands that made the cakes and tucked me in during my childhood days are gone, but right at this moment I feel as close to them as in those never-to-be-forgotten Christmas Eves of long ago, in that beautiful valley of my childhood called Shearstown.

Now my journey down memory lane is ended. I hope you liked what I saw as I turned back the pages of time for a little while. Christmas is just up ahead of us. Let us all remember whose birthday it is and give Him a gift of love from our hearts.

This Christmas memory was written by the late Sister Ann Ameen and first published by The Compass in 1992.