

THE SECOND COMING OF SANTA CLAUS: CHRISTMAS IN A POLYGAMOUS FAMILY

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Four of my father's wives lived at Provo during my childhood, a situation particularly fortunate for the swarm of Taylor kids. Santa Claus came twice to us, instead of just the single time he visited homes of those unfortunates whose fathers had only one wife. We were taught how blessed we were, to be among the very last to be privileged to live the fullness of the gospel; and here was a tangible evidence.

The first Santa visited the individual families, while the second was for the entire clan. There was a distinct difference here: each wife had her own home, her own family unit, as a widow might. My mother and Aunt Nellie each had a large brick home in town; we even had a brick barn, built for family industry, which subsequently became an apartment house. Aunt Roxie and Aunt Rhoda, who were sisters, had adjoining farms just east of the cemetery. The only times the four matriarchal families joined together in my father's idealized concept of the patriarchal clan of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was on festive occasions such as his birthday, holidays, or outings, and particularly on Christmas.

The first Santa came Christmas Eve. Of course we kids pretended not to believe in Santa, but down *deep* . . . so we made every preparation for his arrival. Getting a tree meant a hard day's hike up Rock canyon, and lugging it home. It was always amazing how the scrubby little conifer became suddenly enormous in the parlor.

My sisters meanwhile were popping corn, stringing it and cranberries to decorate the tree, cutting strips of red and green crepe paper. Candles were popular as tree lights, but my mother wouldn't allow such a fire hazard. Red apples and paper flowers took the place of decorations from the store, though we did have a few yards of old tinsel, carefully saved year after year.

Before going to bed Christmas Eve we hung up our socks and also laid out a supper for Santa, knowing he'd be hungry from his busy night. Then as we snuggled in bed his deep voice boomed upstairs from below. "Have all the

children been good this year, Nettie?" "Oh, yes, Santa." "Then I'll leave something for everyone, and a merry Christmas to you all!"

When we crept downstairs before daylight, we found he'd eaten his supper and filled the stockings — the once-a-year orange in the toe, hardtack, home-made divinity, Boston creams, fudge, a popcorn ball. Under the tree we found overalls, shirts, underwear, shoes, things needed and appreciated; and always books, with a top or marbles for the boys, dolls for the girls.

The dolls were something special. As small children, my sisters got a new doll each Christmas, and wore it out. But at the age of accountability came baptism, confirmation, and the Last Doll, one with real hair, with eyes that shut in sleep, limbs with articulated joints. The Last Doll would be treasured, and each Christmas thereafter would come accouterments — dresses, coats, doll house, cupboard, muffin tins with real pies baked in them. When my youngest sister, Deli, saw her Last Doll high in the tree, with blonde hair and big blue eyes with real lashes, she shrieked with delight and began scrambling up the tree for it. Fortunately there were no candles, or the crash of the tree might have burned the house down.

I don't ever recall my father being present at this family Christmas (though inasmuch as he died when I was eight, and there was a total of six wives, my mother's turn might have come when I was too small to remember). His grand entrance on Christmas day was Santa's second coming.

We were alerted of his approach by the yelling of kids in the street, for John W. Taylor seemed to be a special friend of every youngster in Provo. He had a flair for the dramatic, and he always made a grand entrance. I don't remember the time he arrived with coach and four, the Concord stage with its leather springs bursting with kids, my father in command on the high seat, with a foot on the brake and his hands holding a tight rein on the four-horse team of matched bays. But as evidence of a memorable Christmas the Concord stood in the brick barn for years, while below it was the pit, a reminder of his arrival amid blue smoke and blaring horn in a thundering auto-MO-bile.

There was the time he arrived with a buggy full of Navajo rugs (still in service after more than half a century). We were wild with excitement the year he dashed into view on a sulky with bicycle tires, harnessed to a high-stepping racehorse. Though its name was Tom Marshal, we were secretly convinced that this was merely a ringer name and that the horse really was the famous pacer, Dan Patch. Whatever its name, Mother was deathly afraid to ride behind him.

My father's fond dream was for the clan to be self-sufficient; thus the two farms and the brick barn for family industry. I remember only one project for manufacture by family industry, and that was the Two-Step Ladder, perhaps the most memorable of Santa's second comings. The Two-Step Ladder had no rungs, only two metal plates for the feet, which slid up and down slotted boards in a most marvelous manner when everything worked, but were a menace to life and limb when they didn't, which was often.

With my father's arrival, the whole clan gathered, either at Aunt Nellie's or my mother's big house, and while the kids played games the four wives worked in the kitchen and pantry preparing Christmas dinner for the horde. While we were constantly exhorted not to "cut our brothers and sisters in half," it never occurred to us to exchange presents with the children of other wives, as we did among the immediate family. And, because of sheer numbers, the games had a

supervised aspect. There were tag games, Run My Sheepie Run, London Bridge is Falling Down, and, for each youngster in turn, there was the Hat Race.

Under the hat were treasures, a pocket knife, marbles, candy, a top. I lined up with my brothers, and at the signal we raced for the hat. Despite being the smallest in the race, I somehow reached the hat first, dived for it, and as the hat was lifted at the last instant clutched a double handful of fresh cow manure.

Inside, awaiting dinner, my father was the beaming audience as his children performed — elocution, piano pieces, songs. My specialty was “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam,” but everyone had heard it the previous year, so I gained attention by throwing a tantrum. Still beaming, my father picked me up, took me to the pantry, and put my head under the cold water tap. It was the last tantrum I threw in his presence. His methods of discipline were unique but effective.

My brother Clif (Aunt Nellie’s), was one of the more high-spirited of the hyper-thyroid clan; he and Paul Brimhall, son of the president of B.Y.U., had decided to quit school and see the world. They boarded a freight train at Provo, crawling in through the ice compartment of a refrigerator car. The train crew shut and locked the hatch, and the boys weren’t discovered until the train stopped to re-ice at Pocatello. My father received news of Clif’s whereabouts calmly, and advised authorities to hold him until he sent someone, then to submit a bill for board and room. Cliff and Paul spent thirty-two days in jail before Paul’s brother finally arrived for them. Cliff then spent two days in my father’s Salt Lake office, awaiting punishment. Instead, he was outfitted with school clothes, and on putting him on the train for Provo, my father said, “Son, next time you decide to see the world, go ahead, but tell your mother and me, for we both love you.”

As a footnote, I might mention that when my father departed this world, he left behind six families of small children; thus the fatherless clan was placed in the classic situation from which springs delinquency. But the strength of his personality remained behind; we had never seen much of him in life, anyhow. The dedicated widows always spoke of him in hushed tones. His precepts and maxims were our rules of conduct; so that somehow he remained with us, as he always had been; and of his three dozen children, not one turned delinquent nor left the Church.

As we all sat together on Christmas afternoon, we had an unscheduled thrill. We were singing my father’s favorite hymn, “God Be With You,” when one of my brothers put a clothespin on the tomcat’s tail. The cat let out a yowl and raced wildly about, kids scattering in all directions. The cat streaked over the table, upsetting a vase of flowers and celery set in water glasses, then bounded to the window curtains and clawed up them, while the boys yelled happily and the girls screamed with fright. My father awaited the moment, then plucked off the clothespin, and the hymn continued.

Finally — the Christmas dinner. An enormous turkey; three big cakes with white, yellow, and chocolate frosting; a half dozen pies, mince, apple, and pumpkin; heaping mounds of dressing and mashed potatoes; gravy, corn, salad, pickles, bread and butter.

But first, the blessing. From the head of the table my father surveyed his family, and bestowed the honor on one of the younger boys. We bowed heads, smelling the lovely bouquet of food as it was blessed. And then the young

supplicant said earnestly, "And, dear Father, protect us from the tomcats." The table exploded with laughter.

It was later, near bedtime, that the big treat came. This was the latest installment of the never-ending adventure story of Jack, Leonora and Rain-in-the-Face, two enterprising youngsters and their Indian pal. My father sat in the center, his four wives and their children spellbound by the latest episode. And, master story-teller that he was, he stopped with our beloved characters in a situation of peril, to be extricated next installment.

Father was completely happy with these occasions with his family, except for one small thing. Mother had a hired girl who was surly, not very smart, and was ugly as a mud fence.

"Nettie, why in heaven's name do you keep this scarecrow? Why don't you get a better girl?"

"Because, John," my mother said with a bright smile, "you might marry her." He was gone next morning when we woke up, off on one of his many gigantic enterprises. The clan had dispersed to the individual families. But he loved occasions, and we could look forward to the gathering of the clan on his return — his birthday, 4th of July, Thanksgiving, and as the second coming of Santa Claus on Christmas.

