

# My Best Childhood Christmas

*Father dear father come home with me now<sup>1</sup>*

It could have been 1958 but in retrospect, it was most likely 1959. One thing about reminiscing is you need to grasp the entire context to set the date. Events are recalled, sometimes with only a vague remembrance of the year, even if the seasons are vividly etched in your memory. I would have been 10 and my brother 13, so he already had the paper route on our south Everett street, Seahurst Avenue.

Now, except for the “dog year” and the entirely different stream of consciousness necessary to tell that tale, Christmas was a routine in the Juntila household. Holiday dinners alternated from Thanksgiving and Christmas, from year to year being at the in-laws or out-laws, the Stillwells’ or Juntilas’, every year. Of course, Christmas morning was always under a tree killed for Christ in our “den.”

To explain the quotes on “den” even in 1959 with the new addition to our home the den was the living room but always referred to as the den since that was the name of the room on the plans from H.O. Seifert in 1946. Until 1958 we lived in a 500 SF upstairs box situated above a 500 SF basement with the plan allowing for additions north and south, bedrooms to the south and living, dining and a recreation room adjacent to a carport to the north.

I should explain the quotation marks around “den.” After the 1959 addition to our home, the den was really the living room, but we referred to it as the “den,” since that’s what it was called on the plans drawn in 1946, by H.O. Seifert. Until 1958 we’d lived in a 500 square-foot box upstairs, situated above a 500 square-foot basement. The plan allowed for additions, consisting of bedrooms to the south, and a living, dining, and recreation room adjacent to a carport, to the north.

The new addition, one of two in the original plan, provided three new bedrooms and the “eating area”. Until then, my brother and I shared a walled off space in the basement for our bedroom. The rest of the basement was a laundry area, fruit closet full of canned goods and home brew, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Too lazy to look up

roughed half bath with a toilet, all of which was uninsulated. My parents slept on a Simmons Hide-a-bed in the “den” in the upstairs, which included a kitchen and full bath.

None of this was especially unusual so soon after WWII and Korea. We still had a bath; and as my grandparents often said, “Well it’s indoors, not like when we started out.”

It was Christmas in the not yet finished “eating area” with the fake sen wood plywood-paneled walls, where everything above the subfloor remained under construction; the work being done in their spare time by my maternal grandfather, Bert, and few other relatives. Other times about the “holidays” (an ambiguous term in my family) the typical present was the fishnet stocking full of candy provided by the Shriners. I’ll bet the Papists had something like that but with a prayer.

Since I was named Stephen I took the point. So for a few years, my folks brought these string bag stockings of candy for our presents, and supplemented with some other stuff. This stuff in question was often some small orange things with a Japanese name. We had to peel them and eat some stringy pulp, in order to get some juice from the seeds and such. Folks thought these were great. Not so much for brother and me though.

So except for the dog my folks added some maple syrup candy and the “ball and a whip that snaps.” I don’t recall any whip that snapped, but maybe I wasn’t using it right; probably a learned thing, like a top or a yo-yo. But there were some jacks, rubber balls, and eventually a pocket knife when you were 8, but you knew they got that from the Junior Boot Store where you got your shoes—at least if, well if your feet were strange as mine were. Now, we did get the occasional Dinky Toy or Matchbook car that we’ had coveted down at Coy’s Toys, and a Flexible Flyer sled to share one year, only to get a another sled the following, year since that sharing never worked out so well. I remember the old joke; “We are sharing Dad. I get it going down the hill and he gets it coming up.”

Do not get me wrong, brother and I had all the stuff kids really needed. We had some steel roller skates that went over your shoes and tightened with a key. We wore the keys on strings looped around our necks. The problem was we had a rock driveway and a gravel street. I still do not skate. Both of us had all the fishing gear you could ask for or need, and we were armed. I

carried a circa 1920s Daisy BB gun and being a two-handed gun, I had a Hopalong Cassidy two gun holster set with a vintage Benjamin Franklin pellet gun in the left holster, lovely piece that one all wood and brass, and the Daisy in the right. Brother had the Daisy Rifle, so we didn't need no stinking Red Rider. I do not recall what happened to the original cap guns. They had bullets that you removed and inserted caps, not the roller cap guns that were more common and popular because you could shoot far more than six shots.

Clearly I am not responsible for the ebbs, flows and tugs through the eddies and whorls in my stream of consciousness. Just do not get too close to the shore at night. You might not like what you can't see.

But that last, great, bright Christmas morning, my brother and I didn't get up early, as there was no more Santa Clause or even an insanity clause. Dad had left Westinghouse to work for Boeing—something to do with defense stuff and a bird called the 707. He had a chance to go the Mojave for some sort of secret job, but Mom said no. (She was always the fool and never a risk taker in life). We got three bedrooms and one of them was mine.

So that morning we came out expecting the usual, the nylon string bags of candy, and yes we now knew where they came from. We expected to find maybe crystal radio sets or another car for the train set that we got one a year which had only an engine, five feet of track, and two cars. We would want to drive real cars, automobiles, before we ever had that train set as promised, hinged on a sheet of plywood, hanging from the wall, with tunnels and other stuff. But let's stay on track, or perhaps task here.

What a Christmas it was to become. We went into the "eating area" (according to the H.O. Seifert plan) to get some breakfast. It was probably Dad's favorite (no oatmeal today), with it being Christmas and all: fried sausage and potatoes. Soon he would have a Kent cigarette with the micronite filter in one hand and a Tom and Jerry in the other.

But there in the "eating area," were bikes. At that time I was still riding the 16-inch framed hand-me-down I had learned on needing training wheels until I was nearly 6. But here were gleaming--nearly radiant—bicycles, and not just any bikes, or even just any new bikes. These were Schwinn Corvettes.

In 1959 the Schwinn Corvette came in Radiant Red, Blue, Green and Black. White had been discontinued in 1958. These were of course 26" stainless steel frames, painted black with chromed stainless steel fenders. They rode on 26" x 1 3/4" balloon wide white walls Westwind tires. Schwinn Corvette was painted, not decaled, on the upper frame bar of the unique Schwinn "Y" upper frame, and repeated on the chain guard in white on black.

The ride included a Sturmey Archer TCW 3 speed rear hub with a three gear selector near the heavy rubber black grip on the right handle bar, both of which were embossed with the classic Schwinn logo. Over the front fender was a carrier with the spring of a beaver trap. Above, in the center of the chrome handlebars, was the ball headlight, powered by a Delta generator mounted on the rear wheel. The rear fender sported a real glass lens taillight. For the feet there were bow pedals with side screws and for the seat there was a black and white Troxel saddle.

This was truly the Corvette of two wheelers. We had been advised by no less an expert than Captain Kangaroo himself, to "buy a Schwinn." When "Mr. Schwinn Dealer" appeared on the Captain's show once, he rode in on a black Corvette, assuring us the bikes were only sold by authorized, franchised Schwinn dealers who were franchised and serviced what they sold. These bikes were freetraded, and manufactured in Chicago by Arnold, Schwinn & Co. (They actually were supported by a nearly 25% tariff on foreign manufactures that was nearly 25%, and such was the myth of free trade.)

So, we could have been looking at bikes from J.C. Penney, the J.C. Higgins from Sears, or the Hawthorn (manufactured by the Cleveland Welding Company) from Montgomery (Monkey) Wards, but instead we had real Schwinn. My brother realized that in part the gifts were to get him off his older 24-inch hand painted framed, no-gear wonder and help him with his paper route. Seahurst was a steep grade, and without a good bike, it was a hike. Seeing our gaping open-mouths my father beamed from his living room chair in the den, and it wasn't just the Tom and Jerrys giving him Christmas cheer. We knew we were loved.

That summer of 1960 we would ride down to the Mukilteo ferry with our neighbors the Thorson boys and cruise all over Whidbey Island on our bikes. We picked up soda and beer bottles, usually from the sides of the road wherever we rode, and claimed the deposits. Our proceeds were split evenly since there was no telling when the left side of the road had a couple quart

bottles worth nickels, while the right only had stubby beers worth a penny. Our loot, mainly three-cent soda bottles, was converted into dimes. We then tugged the handgrips off our bikes, and put the dimes in the inside the tubes of our handle bars. We rattled like tambourines as we rode, but we always had ferry money, or enough for a candy bar and a pop.

Early the next summer, June 28, 1961, my father died at the age of 45 and I got a paper route.