

The Happiest Homemade Christmas

Lean year teaches a young girl that joy and happiness don't come from the department store.

Bobbie Shafer:

Thanksgiving had passed, and, at 8, I couldn't think of anything except that it would soon be Christmas. My grandparents and parents had other things on their minds, but I was too young and oblivious to know. We lived on a small farm about 10 miles from town. I wasn't aware that the company where my father worked was downsizing, and he and my mother worried that he might lose his job. Nor did I realize that beef prices had dropped, and Daddy Joe, my grandfather, was concerned for our farm. All I knew was that Christmas was on its way, and I was more than ready. My family had always been frugal, so when my allowance dropped from 50 cents every two weeks to 50 cents a month that year, I really didn't think much about it. I could still drop money in the collection plate on Sundays and go to the movies twice a month when my grandfather made his weekly trek into town for supplies. Most of my clothes were made from flour sacks and Mother's old dresses, but they were handsomely sewn and very stylish.

Before long, Mother and Grandma started cooking the pies and cakes for the holidays, and I knew Christmas was just around the corner.

We traipsed into the woods and collected pine boughs, cedar limbs and bushels of red berried holly branches. Mother and Grandma had saved every scrap of red material and made large bows that Daddy Joe hung on the fence posts leading to the house, and we draped pine and cedar along the fences and on the porch rails. Daddy strung lights along the roof and around the porch, and Grandma and Mother carefully unpacked all the decorations for the tree.

Daddy, Daddy Joe and I went into the forest to find that perfect tree, and after what seemed like hours, find it we did. Maybe it was because money was scarce – I'll never know – but the tree Daddy picked was gigantic. Daddy and Daddy Joe pulled, tugged, grunted and let fly a few ear-plugging expletives, until they finally got the tree off the truck and into the yard. They attached the stand and carried it inside.

Mother and Grandma strung the lights, and we all hung myriad balls and ornaments, paper chains, shiny silver ropes, and strings of popcorn and cranberries from top to bottom. Finally, we carefully placed thin streamers of silver icicles on each and every limb. We stood back and held our breath as Daddy plugged in the lights; our faces reflected our admiration and joy in the beautiful glittering ornaments of our tree.

This year, I had been instructed to make the gifts I was to give. I wove potholders for Grandma and pressed flowers for Mother to frame. I made bookmarks for Daddy Joe, and Grandma helped me knit a scarf for Daddy.

Excitement mounted as days slowly drifted by, and despite my concern that time would stop and Christmas Eve would never arrive, it did, and after supper we went out onto the porch to wait.

Daddy Joe was always the first to hear the approach of Santa Claus. He always heard the bells or the pawing of the reindeer, and he would creep inside with all of us on his heels and peek inside the living room door. Wonders upon wonders, Santa always had been there and had somehow slipped away without being seen.

This particular Christmas of hand-woven potholders, frame-pressed flowers, strange-looking scarves

and ribbon book markers, Santa had outdone himself. He left a lovely doll and a wonderful book, but nothing compared to the most beautiful dollhouse I had ever seen. Sitting in front of the tree was a two-story mansion painted white with a red roof. Its large rooms were filled with exquisite, tiny furniture.

Each wall was papered, and each room had a tiny rug on the floor. Delicate curtains hung from each window, and the couches and beds were covered in matching fabric. Downstairs, the kitchen had a little dining area with a table and chairs, and the living room sported a fireplace with cellophane fire. A lovely staircase led upstairs to three bedrooms and a nursery, all furnished with little pictures on the wall and thimble vases on the tables. A paper family was provided to live in the house. They all had paper outfits complete with purses, hats and shoes. Alongside the house was a small merry-go-round made from an old fan blade and a slide for the paper children to play on. In the back, a little corral held paper horses ready to ride. Behind the house was a two-story schoolhouse for my paper children to attend. The teacher had a closet of clothes and accessories as well. I cried with joy at the beauty of my gifts, and my family cried at my joy.

I can't imagine the hours my grandfather and father spent taking apart apple crates and creating that exquisite house and school and all that furniture, nor the time my mother and grandmother spent making those wee curtains and bedspreads, covering that couch and chairs, and cutting out all those dolls and clothes.

Times got better, Daddy's job was secured, and beef prices went up. Our joy for Christmas never changed— through the good times or the bad. But the leather jackets, boots, talking dolls and multitudes of future gifts never brought more joy than my apple-crate dollhouse and school and my hand-crafted paper dolls. When I later discovered how worried all the adults had been that year, I realized so clearly that joy and happiness come from the heart— from love, not a department store.

Bobbie Shafer is a 69-year-old freelance writer from east Texas. After she retired, she began to fulfill a lifetime dream of being a writer. She believes our golden years are given to us to remember and share the lovely memories of our past and expressions of love for the present.