

Remembering Christmas
by Tom Wilkinson, Vice President
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I grew up in the middle of the country, in Shelbyville, Indiana, a baby boomer born in 1956, smack in the middle of my generation. When you drive into my hometown from the north on State Road 9, a sign commemorating the fact that the Shelbyville Golden Bears won the Indiana state high school basketball championship in 1947 greets you. That was fifty-nine years ago. There have been no subsequent championships. No one questions whether the sign is dated. That's how important high school basketball is in my home state. If you have seen "Hoosiers," the movie depicting the unlikely championship season of Milan High School in 1954, then you know something of my roots.

I was reminded of those roots while reading "The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir," a wonderful book by Bill Bryson recalling his childhood in Des Moines, Iowa, during roughly the same years. I highly recommend it, especially to former little boys who came of age in those days.

I remember our annual Christmas ritual. My mom and dad would pile my brother and me (and later, in the early 60's, my twin sisters) into the car, a burnt-orange 1957 Chevrolet Bel-Air hardtop. We drove the thirty miles to Indianapolis, on the brand-new Interstate Highway 74, bound for the enormous, stately L. S. Ayres department store, for Christmas shopping, a walk by the animated window displays, and most importantly, a visit with Santa. That was before the malling of America, when people still shopped downtown, but my rural hometown lacked a department store of sufficient magnitude to host a Santa Claus for the kids. We had a terrific hardware store, J. C. DePrez, where you could buy nails by the pound, instead of the shrink-wrapped bubble-packed variety you find today at Home Depot. We had several grocery stores, and I remember accompanying my mother on her weekly rounds. She would visit at least three: Thomas's Market had the best meat, Standard the best all around prices, A&P the best coffee.

The main attraction of visiting the Ayres department store was, of course, the visit with Santa. We kids would board a small-scale train replica, depart from the depot, and wind around a winter wonderland of fake trees and snow bound for the station at the North Pole, where we would disembark from the train, wait our turn to sit on Santa's lap, tell him our fondest wishes, have our picture snapped, then climb back on the train to return to our waiting parents.

Ayres was a very thoughtful store – they painted a yellow line on the floor, with arrows directing kids to the toy department and the train that would take them to see the jolly old elf. Of course, we had to walk through displays of electric trains, slot cars, erector sets and basketballs. I don't remember any dolls, but I suspect they had them too.

By the way, that train is now on display at the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis. When the train you rode on as a kid is now in a museum, it means you're really old.

Now, I do most of my Christmas shopping from the comfort of my home office, courtesy of the Internet. I do make an occasional foray to Barnes and Noble to browse for literary gifts, but the downtown department store expedition, with frosty animated window displays and the yellow line on the floor directing kids to Santa, is a distant memory. These days, all department stores seem to be named Macy's, even in Chicago, where the venerable Marshall Field's name has been replaced by that ignominious New York store name. Chicagoans reportedly are not taking well to the change.

Of all the many Christmas gifts I received as a kid, I confess to remember only a few: my prized phonograph, an electric train set that had a clever slot car crossing where my brother and I staged elaborate crashes, one of those absurd vibrating electric football games, and a walkie-

talkie set. Those are all gone now. But the most important gifts remain. My parents, through their quiet example, gave my sisters, brother and me far more lasting and important gifts. It was then, back in those idyllic days, that we learned about love, faith in God, community, caring, giving and a whole lot of other values that have remained as solid as bedrock, despite the volatility and turbulence of the years following those childhood days.

May we all remember that our children and grandchildren, and all the children of the world, are watching us, soaking up the world around them. To paraphrase Irving Berlin, "May their days be merry and bright."

God came to us as a child on that first Christmas, a gift of such enormity that it defies human understanding even today. How do we respond to such an audacious gift? Perhaps in our small way, we can give something back, and give all God's children a measure of what God has blessed us with. May we be generous givers this Christmas, offering all that we are and all that we have to honor that baby in the manger in Bethlehem.

The board and staff of the Foundation wish everyone a blessed and generous Christmas season. Merry Christmas!

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