



Christmas cards mailed? Shopping finished? Gifts wrapped, tagged and bedecked with bows? Fruit cakes and cookies baked? How about the jellies, jams, marmalades, conserves and other goodies?

Made your cranberry sauce? Yes, I know these delicious concoctions take sugar. Yet, it's Christmas! Are we to forego all the delectables traditionally a part of this holiday season? Not all, please!

Economize on some gifts, perhaps. Trim your greeting card list -- for every ten names you drop, you'll save a dollar in postage alone, not to mention the cost of the cards. Put the savings towards five-pounds of sugar.

Corner-cutting in some ways does make sense. Spending in some ways makes sense too. This year, especially, the children have first priority and grown-ups won't expect showers of packages containing gifts they probably don't need or really even hanker for.

Cutting Christmas-card lists isn't easy. I know, just having spent several evenings trying. Because I've moved around the world considerably, lived in a dozen different communities in several different states, my list is mostly people I seldom see or hear from during the rest of the year. This seasonal greeting is more than courtesy; it's the only way to keep in touch.

For them and for me, it provides another link in each still-growing golden chain of friendship. Those chains may be slender, delicate, even appear fragile -- but they are not.

The links are stronger than steel, for they're flexible, even elastic and giving, twisting with life's stresses to fall easily between us, fitting and forming to the necessities of our different life-paths, stretching when need be to reach from year-to-year.

They're wrought of gold of shared experience, including but not limited to school days, long warm summers, youthful escapades; they're forged in young adulthood from the ores of our youthful marriages; they're fired in parenthood when childhood was hardly behind us; they're polished by sharing inevitable losses and sorrows, delights and surprises, illnesses and health.

Their intricate chasing bears imprint of cramped apartments in teeming cities, work-a-day lives in suburbia, passing touches of one life upon another -- from one country, one culture, to another country, another culture -- and, as two people came together. The first links of each new chain were created.

Again this Christmas, the chains grow new links, each uniquely designed to commemorate another year's bonding one to another.

Among the names and addresses turned up a reminder to myself, a note to do a column about my happiest Christmas.

Thinking back over the decades, trying to choose one as happiest, wakened memories of almost forgotten days.

Was it the year my little-girl cup-of-joy was filled to overflowing with a doll, a miniature baby carriage, and a pair of slippers with bells on the toes?

Or was it the Christmas my big brother gave me a Sloppy Joe sweater -- just like the ones we wear today?

Was it the last one before The War - 1942 - the last year we were all still at home, a family intact, before life split and scattered us to the four corners of the world?

Was it a Christmas celebrated in my own home with parents and other family present as my guests?

Or perhaps a year when, after sadness, the discovery of relationships and involvements lit once again the fires of human warmth and understanding where only ashes had lain too long on a cold hearth?

None of these -- and all of these. Christmas each year is now the happiest, and all-years-rolled-together to make one Christmas of all Christmasses, each one, happiest.

It's not possible to separate one from another. Christmas is a composite of all Christmasses past.

There are all the sounds of all Christmasses -- the music, the bells, the carols, the laughter. The sizzle of the turkey roasting, the rustle of gift-wrappings, the voices of loved ones whispering secrets, words describing the First Christmas -- a Babe born and a star hanging in the Eastern sky.

There are all the smells of all Christmasses -- the green fragrance of balsam and pine, the tingle of snow-filled and frosty night stinging the nostrils, the odor of wool and rubber overshoes at candlelit Christmas Eve services mingling with burning wax and wick, the Christmas-dinner smells tantalizing every appetite.

There are the lights and brights of all Christmasses -- candles flickering at windows, red and green of holly, black and white of New England winter, gay packages and bows, sparkle of crystal, silver and china spread on snowy linen, tree lights, red, blue, green and gold, glistening on tinsel.

Most of all there's the spirit of all Christmasses -- the feeling of Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men, the warmth of families coming together, the shivery awe of a silvery soprano caroling a hymn, tenor making melody, alto giving harmony, rich bass filling more than ears with sound -- filling the very soul with Christmas feeling.

How can there be a happiest Christmas when none would be complete without all those that came before -- a part of the last one, this one, and yet to come, the next one?

To all, those near-by and those far away, the words "Merry Christmas" carry more than a wish for a single happy day.

To all, near or far, newer friends or older ones, "Merry Christmas" is a wish for all the years, all the Christmasses we've shared together or spent apart.

Christmas brings its own blessings. Not every one can be the happiest, yet in each, there's healing memory of years-gone-by to ease aching hearts, lighten burdens, soften angers, mend hurts, and draw us all together in warm love and understanding.

With each added Christmas our store of memories grows richer and fuller. We add another golden link to the chains of friendship that clasp us, bind us, hold us close one to another, at this joyous season.

And that's why Christmas card lists are so hard to trim.

May your heart be peaceful this Christmas day.