



Before it's all forgotten because there's no longer anyone around to ask, let's write it down: how Osterville celebrated Christmases seventy and eighty years ago.

It's already almost too late, for there's no one left to tell us how it all began; in fact, there aren't many who recall how it was. But some do. To some the Christmas Eve parties at the Village Hall are a vivid memory.

In the early years of this century (no, my own memory doesn't go that far back, and I'm only telling it as it's been told to me), the Village Hall was where Christmas happened.

At Christmastime the building buzzed with activity. In those days there were no strangers in the village, for everyone knew every intimate detail about the lives of everyone else. In fact, most were related, one way or another, and the villagers were essentially one large family. All four hundred, give or take, for that was the village population.

Early in December, hall association members, those with the responsibility for raising money to support and maintain it, divided up duties for the Christmas party. One arranged the entertainment, some got the hall ready, several accepted the chore of cleaning up afterwards, and always Alcott N. Hallett promised to bring up the tree.

Most of us know "Bucky" Hallett; Alcott was Bucky's Dad.

Planning was complete when Abbott Robbins agreed to be Santa Claus, a part he played every year. Abbott, though short of stature, made up for it in girth; he was ideally built for the role.

For two full weeks before the holiday, two Osterville stores offered Christmas gifts for sale. "Mulberry Corners", Miss Edie Bob's department store located where Charley Kalas' Country Store stands, was open year-round, at Christmas time was a busy spot.

The other, a summer shop run by Carrie Rich, stood about where Cape Cod Bank and Trust is now. During those two short weeks preceding December 25th Carrie's store was stocked and open for business. Two small kerosene stoves failed to dispel the chill, but she did a rushing business just the same.

Christmas Eve afternoon, before darkness fell, the presents were brought; people lugging huge laundry baskets or pushing wheelbarrows full of packages along the unpaved roads converged upon the hall.

Inside, the hall was filled with fragrance from the tall, full cedar tree standing straight as an arrow in the center of the stage. It had been cut from the swamp, hauled up the hill on a lugwagon, dragged through the double doorway, set up and braced firmly to hold the packages.

Tables were ready on the stage too, and gifts — wrapped, tied and tagged with loving care — were piled everywhere.

Between four and seven o'clock the men tied the packages to the great tree's branches, bedecking the boughs with decorations of love. By the time they finished the tree's limbs bent down beneath the weight, the tables were heaped high, and even the stage floor was covered with them.

As the hour of seven approached, mothers, fathers, grandparents, maiden aunts, and bachelor uncles, together with every child from the newest born on up, walked to the hall.

Once all had gathered, the festivities began with a short program. One child might sing a song; another, recite a poem; sometimes the audience was treated to a duet or someone played a "piece" on a musical instrument. The program was brief for all were anticipating Santa's arrival.

The entertainment over, someone would shout, "Hey there, I think I hear something!" All the talk and babble, laughter and visiting, stopped. Everyone listened.

ure enough! There'd be a racket resembling hoofbeats on the roof from high in the rafters, a jingle of sleigh bells, a loud thump! as Santa landed. Suddenly, Santa himself, carrying his pack of presents, bounded onto the stage.

He was the perfect personification of Santa as described in Dr. Clement C. Moore's "A Visit From St. Nicholas."

"Dressed all in fur from his head to his foot, his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot. A bundle of toys he had flung on his back, and he looked like a peddler, just opening his pack."

"His eyes, how they twinkled; his dimples, how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry. His droll little mouth was drawn up in a bow, and the beard on his chin was as white as the snow."

After handing out presents to a few of the younger children — but not too many, since patience was short and everyone was restlessly awaiting the gifts hung on the tree and piled on the stage — Santa explained he couldn't tarry for he had many miles to travel and stops to make before morning.

And off he'd go.

This Santa was real to all the children and perhaps half-believed by many of the grown-ups, for he was the only Santa anyone ever saw. There were no plastic ones, waving and blinking yellow eyes in store windows, no bell-ringing Santas on corners collecting for good causes, no jolly gentlemen in crimson suits opening doors for bank customers.

There were no pre-Christmas parades and Santa didn't arrive by helicopter since no one had ever seen a flying machine. The only Santa people ever saw was the one who appeared at the hall, once a year, and he was the spittin' image of the elf who drove his miniature sleigh, drawn through the star-lit heavens by eight tiny reindeer, described in the children's Christmas poem.

No sooner did he depart than the "cutters" came forward. These men snipped the gifts from the tree. There were two "callers" to receive them, men with strong loud voices to read off the names.

And there were "passers" to carry the presents to those who waited. These were tennage girls who, growing up, looked forward with enthusiasm to the year they'd be old enough to be a "passer".

The people sat on the hard wooden seats, waiting and waiting to hear their names. When the caller shouted out a name, that person yelled "Here!" and the "passer" brought his gift to him. Sometimes there were verses, as well as name tags, attached to the present, and these were read aloud for everyone to hear, adding considerably to the merriment.

As each gift was delivered, of course, it was opened and displayed for all to see, admire, and share the pleasure.

When all the presents had been passed, a final small gift was made to each little girl and boy. Not an orange, not an apple, not nuts, but a little bag of candy! Once, long ago, there'd been no presents at all for some children in one family. Since everyone agreed this should never happen again, a bag of candy was given each child.

That was the signal for the villagers to begin collecting their possessions and bundling up for the walk home through the cold frosty night, calling out good nights and holiday wishes as they went.

And this was Christmas, if we could turn back the calendar, back through the years before World War II, and World War I, good times and bad, booms and depressions, back to the turn of the century when Osterville was no more than a tiny New England village, and the only people living here were cousin, aunt, uncle — relative of some kind — to everyone else.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!!**