

Seniors share touching holiday stories

From each of the seniors who have shared a part of their personal history in this column over the last few years, the greatest gift to me has been listening to their heart's cherished memories. During this holiday season, a few Clayton residents reminisce about their most memorable holiday recollections.



MARIE SUTTON

MARIE SUTTON, 86: In 1943, I was stationed in New York City in the WAVES (Navy) during WWII.

It was my first Christmas holiday away from home. A dear Scottish lady that I met at church invited me to go with her to Staten Island to her friend's house for Christmas. They were so kind and loving and even gave me gifts.

Instead of a lonely time, it was a happy time. I'll never forget their kindness to me, a 22-year-old girl away from

home the first time at Christmas.

MARY CALLAHAN, 67: One of my favorite Christmas memories is from the '70s, when our eldest children and I made gingerbread houses. In the days before store-bought kits were available, it was quite a project.

The one we chose required 11 x 17 sheet cakes made ahead and cut warm from a pattern we had to create. While the cake cured, and smelled wonderful, for three days, we searched the local candy stores for decorations.

The decorating was the most fun. After assembling the body of the house, the fancy French hard candies and others were "glued" on with the royal icing cement to construct the house and simulate snow over the doors and windows. There was lots of finger licking and popping of smaller candies into mouths.

Then the big challenge of the roof came. The pitch of the roof was very steep and the pieces kept sliding off. We had tried holding it on, pushing toothpicks through to the walls, etc., but nothing worked. We finally braced the bottom edge of the roof and let the "cement" dry over night. Icing snow, ribbon candy, gumdrops and the chimney were then applied.

Luckily, after all that work, the house lasted several years. When the snow on the roof began to discolor, we made a new one.

MADDIE CASKEY, 84: I sang with several girls I had met in high school, performing in San Francisco and the area. We went to the USO and auditioned and they accepted us to go on tour to entertain the troops. It was December 1944 and we were half way in the air when they told us we were headed to India.

We got to India and sang for the troops in India and Burma (now Myanmar). The day before Christmas, an Air Corp man stepped up to me and said he wanted to take me out. The first day he came to see us, he sat in the back row but when he saw me for the second performance, he was in the front row.

A handsome guy with dark hair and blue eyes, Bill Caskey was his name. He told me that he was going to be stuffing stockings that would go to the Polish orphans and asked me if I wanted to help. I spent my Christmas Day stuffing stockings. That was 63 years ago and we have been married for 61 years now.

NADINE MACSTAY, 84: One of many Christmases we had together as a family included our grandchildren ages 4 to 7 and they were at our daughter Nadine's home for Christmas Eve. They were waiting for Santa Claus to come and when they heard a loud noise, they all ran to look out the window.

Down the hill they saw a large, red truck and in the back stood Santa Claus and a very large bag of toys. They all started yelling, except my grandson - who started screaming. He stopped, though, when Santa gave out all the presents to the children.

My husband played Santa for his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren for many years.

MIKE CALLAHAN, 69: In the mid 1960s, I was serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. It was shortly before Christmas, and Bob Hope and his entourage visited our military

base. Although I was away for the event, his visit did much to improve troop morale and create the temporary sense that "all is calm, all is bright."

Upon my return to the small hut that I shared with several other Marines, we decided that we needed a Christmas tree.

Using the only material that was in ample supply, empty beer cans, we erected a small pyramid-shaped tree. We then strung a small set of lights around the cans. Although it didn't look or smell much like a Christmas tree, it was an inspiring symbol of what we thought mostly about at that time.

With Christmas rapidly approaching, it is time to give some thought and prayer for those serving our country. Some have been away from their family for a long time and are located in many distant and hazardous places. Give thanks for they are giving their today so that we can have our tomorrow. During this holiday season many of them will be "dreaming of a (white) Christmas" at home.

CONNIE LECLAIRE, 80: I remember having Christmas when the whole family gathered together at my uncle's house that he built on a hill in Providence, Rhode Island. It was the only time of the year that the children got to go and see a special movie. We also got a bag of candy. That house was very special with a lot of memories and we always would go to see it when we were in town.

FRED STROMBERG, 90: In December 1944, I was in the Army's 139 General Hospital just north of Liverpool, England, recovering from wounds received in action. I was sad, depressed and somewhat demoralized from being away from my family - my first Christmas away from home.

A group of 10 children, ages 7 to 10, came into our ward and sang Christmas carols. They were just wonderful and more professional than their ages indicated. After, they all spent time visiting with us. It was so enjoyable and they made Christmas what it should be.

PEARL SALVADOR, 91: When I was a child, there were 12 children in the family. The day before Christmas, we made



COLLEEN ELWY SHARING HISTORY

lots of candy and my brother would go to the forest to pick out a tree for us. We had ornaments and decorated the tree.

Santa always brought our presents and the tree was in the parlor, where we had 12 chairs lined up with our nametags on each chair, so we would know what Santa had brought for each of us. We would mostly get clothes and also an orange with a small bag of hard candy.

My sister played the piano, my dad the violin and my mom the harp and we would all sing Christmas carols and later have a really nice dinner together. We didn't have a lot of gifts, but it was always happiness for all of us.

LORA INGALLS, 88: In December 1944, I was living 200 miles away from my nearest relative in a small apartment with my two children, Charles, 4, and Lenita, 2. My husband was somewhere in the South Pacific serving in the Navy.

For several weeks, Charles had been looking forward to Christmas. He said over and over, to anyone who would listen, "Santa is coming with toys for me and my sister." During the war, everything was in short supply, including toys, but I had no money for toys even if I could have found them.

I was in despair knowing that my children would be disappointed on Christmas morning. As I put them to bed Christmas Eve, my heart was heavy. What would I tell them when they awoke? I felt helpless but prayed that God would provide something.

A short time later, there was a knock on the door. There, to my great joy and surprise, stood an unfamiliar woman with a huge basket filled with toys and Christmas goodies. I was dumbfounded! She explained that a group of neighbors combined efforts to provide Christmas baskets to families with loved ones in the war. I slept well that night, so thankful for an answered prayer and eager to see my children's faces the next morning.



CONNIE LECLAIRE



MARY CALLAHAN



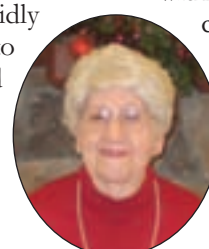
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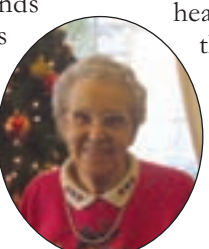
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