



REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IN MID-20TH CENTURY COLLINGWOOD

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How times have changed! In the mid-20th Century significant seasonal happenings and observances between September and January such as Back-to-School, Thanksgiving, Halloween, Remembrance Day, the Santa Claus Parade, Christmas Eve/Day, Boxing Day, and New Year's Eve/Day used to follow one another in a well-demarcated order. The timing may indeed vary from one community to another but, generally speaking, for many years now the increasing commercialization of these events sees the promotion of most of them backing up far in advance of the actual event.

For several years now, the first "Back-to-School" Flyer comes in our morning paper at the beginning of August, mid-way through the school summer holidays when few, if any, students are thinking about buying school supplies. In mid-September of this year before coming to Collingwood for the C.C.I. Reunion, I was in downtown Victoria and saw an enormous banner

stretched across the front of a thrift store proclaiming “HALLOWEEN IS HERE!”—this, nearly a month before Thanksgiving and a month-and-a-half before October 31st! More than thirty years ago I saw displays of Christmas Cards in Woolco on Labour Day weekend. In some malls the “seasonal” music starts to play on November 1st, a week-and-a-half before Remembrance Day. A recent Letter to the Editor of the *Victoria Times-Colonist* pleaded for business owners to not start the Christmas shopping season on November 1st and to show respect for our Veterans by waiting until after Remembrance Day to get out the tinsel and the music. Nevertheless, vast displays of artificial Christmas trees and decorations, Christmas foods, etc. were on display in major department stores at the beginning of November—full-on Christmas competing with poppies (no disrespect to our Veterans intended). We saw our first outdoor display of Christmas lights in someone’s front yard this year early on the very evening of Remembrance Day. Christmas Craft Fairs in Victoria began on November 3rd with the statement “As soon as Halloween ends, the Christmas tunes start playing and the holiday excitement begins!” In Collingwood this year the Christmas season officially launched the weekend of November 17th with the festive 5K run/walk by more than a thousand Santas of all ages, the annual Santa Claus Parade, tree lighting, caroling and fireworks.

The Christmas Season was once contained largely in the month of December. In some families it was a tradition to put up and decorate the live Christmas tree on December 24th. Some families preferred a Scotch pine, others chose a spruce tree and still others, an artificial tree with branches like a bottle brush. In other homes the tree went up earlier, perhaps the week of mid-December. Now, when driving at night, one can see a few Christmas trees lit and decorated in windows in early November. These may be the same folks who keep the tree up and lit all through January and even, in some cases, into February. My grandmother used to say, “Don’t let the New Year catch you with a tree in the house!” Compare that statement with the fact that I once tuned a piano for a family who *never* undecorated their artificial tree—they just put large black garbage bags over it as a dust cover and moved the whole thing into a closet, ready to be brought out at a moment’s notice.

Boxing Day used to be a day off for the retail sector when exhausted clerks could have a day away from work with their families but some bright light reasoned that there was more money to be made by opening the stores on Boxing Day. Many years ago, one of the “Junior” Department stores (K-Mart/Zellers/Woolco etc.) announced they would be open on Boxing Day. So, not to be outdone and miss out on the orgy of spending, the others announced that they, too, would open.

Another year one of the major Department stores (Eaton's/Sears/Hudson Bay etc.) announced their opening on Boxing Day and the others all followed. In recent years the "Black Friday" phenomenon from south of the border has come to Canada. American Thanksgiving falls on the fourth Thursday of November (the Thursday before the last Saturday of the month), followed by the "official" start of the Christmas shopping season the next day when retailers supposedly "go into the black" (making a profit for the year). In fact, "The Black Friday Event" began at a General Motors dealership here in Victoria on November 3rd this year, the announcement screaming from a full page ad in the newspaper. Black Friday is followed three days later by "Cyber Monday" for online shopping and these events have now eclipsed Boxing Day sales which have morphed into, "Boxing Week" sales which start before December 25th. I once heard an economist on TV state that "the American economy thrives on people buying things they don't need with money they don't have". The current level of household debt including credit card balances underscores that statement. According to Kelsey Sheehy of the *Associated Press*, "Last year, 65 percent of millennial shoppers put gifts on their credit cards. This year, roughly a third of them are still paying off that debt, according to an annual survey of holiday shoppers from NerdWallet".

Collingwood in the mid-20th Century was a very different town compared to today. Back then it was a small, blue collar, working man's/woman's town of about 7500 souls where people worked hard to provide—not luxuries—but the daily necessities of life such as shelter, food, clothing and shoes for their families with an occasional visit to the Gayety or Regent Theatres as a treat (admission to a Saturday matinee at the Gayety cost 5 cents). Spas and art galleries were not to be found on Hurontario St. People went swimming at Sunset Point, and at the quarry on the present site of the Royal Canadian Legion or at Wasaga Beach. As an example of how times and lifestyles have changed, a “flyover” on Google Maps now reveals quite a number of backyard swimming pools scattered throughout the town.

Our parents, grandparents, great aunts and uncles had lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression and their spending habits were governed by the times they had been born in and grew up in. The Collingwood Shipyard was the major employer in town in the 1950's. Many a household depended on the wages earned in the Yard and many of those families had one wage earner. As for the Christmas retail season, the merchants on Hurontario St. would have to gauge their stock ordering depending on the state of the Shipyard's order book. If employment in the Yard was brisk, merchants could confidently order stock and know that they would sell

plenty of items. But if the Yard was short of work and many of the men were laid off, caution when ordering for Christmas was imperative. After several prosperous years of building large tankers for the Imperial Oil and British/American companies in the early 1950's, the Yard went through a lean period in 1955-56 when several small vessels including two nondescript dump scows were launched and layoffs in the finishing trades were common. My father was one of those laid off and he found interim work in a sheet metal shop in Guelph during this time before prosperity returned to the Yard.

Shipyard workers layoffs notwithstanding, the last quarter of 1955 was a significant year for retail sales because, on September 28th, CKVR TV Channel 3 in Barrie went on the air from their first transmitter tower that barely peeked over the treetops at Little's Hill on Essa Rd. Local TV had come to Simcoe County and many families, mine included, got their first black & white television that fall and winter, perhaps the largest expenditure of disposable income many people made that year and the one major Christmas present for the whole family. A few families in town had televisions already for several years at this time requiring a tall roof mast with a rotor to turn the antenna toward Toronto or Buffalo to bring in those distant stations, but these were in the minority. The big sales of television sets began in earnest when Channel 3 Barrie, and two months later, Channel 8 from Wingham went on the air.

Among the major television dealers in Collingwood (and some of the brands they sold) enjoying a prosperous Christmas in 1955 were Bert Brydon (Electrohome), Russ Campbell (R.C.A.), Girdwoods (Admiral and Motorola) and Art Foley (Phillips and Philco). Six miles south in Duntroon, Jack Swalm also sold R.C.A. products. The C.B.C. was the only television network in the country at that time and CKVR was an affiliate of that network and carried programming from Toronto via the microwave tower at their studios. Now, on Hockey Night in Canada from Maple Leaf Gardens, we could watch the action instead of just listening to Foster Hewitt on the radio. The phrase, "He shoots, he scores!" took on a new excitement.

If television wasn't sufficient competition for the disposable income of the residents of Collingwood, the merchants on the main street also had to compete with the big guns in "the City" [Toronto]. People of all ages eagerly anticipated the arrival of the Christmas catalogues from Eaton's and Simpsons-Sears. Both of these firms had a mail order office on Hurontario St. and did a huge business at Christmas time. Many a wide-eyed child flipped through the more than 200 pages of these catalogues and dreamed of all the things they would like to get for Christmas presents whereas the reality would be quite different.

We had a Santa Claus Parade in the Christmas season. The perennial Santa Claus in those days was played by our neighbour Joe Grieveson. One year my uncle Howard Hewson (Hewson's Men's Wear) and his next door neighbour Ted McIntosh (McIntosh Shoe Store) had their turn staging the Santa Claus Parade. My uncle told me they spent hours setting up the parade in sub-zero weather, froze their fingers and hands, and he had some choice words to describe the negative feedback they received after the parade was over! If children saw more than one Santa Claus in town on the same day, in their confusion they turned to a parent for an explanation and were told that these were "Santa's helpers".

The Shipyard union put on a yearly Christmas party for the children of Shipyard employees on a Saturday afternoon at the Gayety Theatre. We would watch some old shorts of The Little Rascals, or The East Side Kids/Bowery Boys, and maybe a Roy Rogers western. The Gayety Theatre had about 600 seats in those days and the place was a zoo as we waited for the arrival of Santa Claus—again played by Joe Grieveson. The Russ family tried to maintain order as best they could, but with upwards of 600 wired kids it was no easy task. To the accompaniment of Werner ("Vanna") Zotter's accordion, Santa Joe would lead us in singing Jingle Bells, Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer and some other seasonal ditties before the handing out of the presents. One-by-one we went up onto the stage and were

asked our age by a union member; the age stated, we were then handed a gift appropriate for a boy or girl of that age, then made our way off the stage, out the back door and headed home with our treasure.

Every year the Town of Collingwood would erect two large, tall, Christmas trees decorated with strings of big coloured light bulbs on Hurontario St. One was at the foot of the street between the Mt. View Hotel and Smart's Cannery. The other stood in a vacant lot on the west side of the street near the Bank of Toronto and the Bank of Commerce (their original names before they merged with other banks). When my grandmother Hewson died in early 1957, my mother arranged for one of the large fir trees in my granny's front yard (433 Hurontario St.) to be donated to the Town at Christmas that year. As of Christmas 1958 the season was also brightened up by the ornate strings of coloured lights strung across Hurontario St. in the three blocks between First and Fourth Streets. These were erected in the summer of 1958 for Collingwood's Centennial and remained in place until they were taken down in April 1978.

Decorating the home Christmas tree was always, and still is, a momentous occasion—getting down the boxes of lights and ornaments from a high shelf, fitting the live tree into a stand and making sure it was standing straight before putting on the

lights. Once the tree was up, it had to be checked daily for sufficient water in the stand so it wouldn't drop needles. The older strings of tree lights were wired "in series" which meant that if one of the screwed-in bulbs burned out, the entire string would go out. Finding the dead bulb meant carefully unscrewing each bulb (while trying not to knock fragile ornaments off the tree) and replacing it with a new one in the hope that the string would light up again after the first or second try; sometimes it took many tries. It was and still is wise to plug a string of lights in to test it first before putting it on the tree—much easier to change bulbs on the floor and it was also wise to remember to buy a supply of spare bulbs. A special type of tree lights that came out in 1946 was bubble lights by Noma. These had a coloured base and above that was a glass tube with coloured liquid that would produce a constant stream of bubbles up from the base when they were turned on and warmed up. They added a nice degree of animation to the tree. Occasionally a bubble light would be a slow starter and we had to flick a finger nail against it to get it to start bubbling (not always successful). In addition to decorating our home tree, I also enjoyed, for a number of years, helping to decorate (with the aid of a ladder) a huge floor-to-ceiling tree in the living room at my cousin Sue Storey's house after the large tree was set up by Sam McLeod.

The Sunday School Christmas Concert was a yearly event for proud parents and nervous children with recitations and music. Poems with lines such as, “He [Santa Claus] used to climb the chimney down, but not so anymore—for now he has a magic key that opens every door” were popular. When a child asked in all sincerity how Santa Claus could come if there should be no snow, they were told that Santa’s “Plan B” was an airplane—note that there was no Collingwood Airport at the time! I used to leave out cookies and a mug of hot chocolate for Santa before going to bed on Christmas Eve. In the morning, of course, the cookies were gone and the mug was empty. One year on Christmas morning I found beside the mug a handwritten note that looked remarkably like my mother’s handwriting: “David, I hear that you haven’t been a very good boy this past year—Santa”. Such was the innocence of childhood.

Another seasonal delight was the Candlelight Carol Service. At First Presbyterian Church on Maple St., the church of my mother’s family for several generations, the centre aisle was lined with tall poles tied to the pew ends and the candles on them had tin foil butter tart cups around them to collect the wax (not always totally successfully). Church member and Collingwood Deputy Fire Chief Frank Thomas would sit at the back with a large fire extinguisher in hand just in case one of the candles fell over. If there were such an incident this would

have been a case where the Fire Department would not have needed to make a “house call” since the Deputy Fire Chief was already on site.

In the years long before the Internet and other forms of instant communication existed, the sending and receiving of Christmas cards was a huge part of the season. I particularly liked (and still do) the cards with the sparkles on them—to a child they were almost magical and now, in my seventies, they evoke childhood memories. Home delivery of mail in Collingwood did not begin until 1950 and the letter carriers often braved wild winter weather on those uneven horse-plowed town sidewalks to bring us our mail. I recall one afternoon during a blizzard when Frank Sheffield, covered in snow, came to the door with our mail and my mother asked him if he would like to come in for a few minutes to warm up. He said thanks but declined because he had many more stops to make and disappeared back into the whiteout conditions. The vast volume of Christmas mail in those years even gave us Saturday mail delivery prior to December 25th.

I still have a vivid mental picture of going to church at Christmas one year during a heavy snow storm. Houses, trees and utility wires on Maple St. were heavily laden with fresh snow and the roof and steeple of the Presbyterian Church were so heavy with snow it looked like a picture on a post card or a nostalgic

painting by Trisha Romance from Niagara-On-The-Lake. In those years before the climate started to change, winter came and stayed through to spring and the snow piled up and up until we wondered where we were going to put it all after the next dump of snow. Snow was no problem for Harry Bell and his horse-drawn sleigh. Harry was a public school teacher, the School Board's truant officer and future mayor of Collingwood and many people have fond memories of the sleigh rides he generously offered to the town's children, rides that brought the song *Jingle Bells* to life.

Speaking of snow, before the Pretty River Parkway had ever been thought of, Highway 26 came into town along the entire length of Hume St. to Hurontario St., then down the length of the main street (which was also Highway 24) to First St., then left on First and continued as it still does all the way to Owen Sound. Because Hume, Hurontario and First Streets comprised two provincial highways, the Ontario Department of Highways handled the plowing of these streets. The plowing of snow in the business section was very different in those days. Snow was piled up in the middle of our very wide main street and also at the curb and this necessitated the removal of the parking meters from their posts because otherwise they would have been buried. Because of the width of the street there was still room for one lane of traffic in each direction and cars could still angle park. Each merchant on the street was responsible

for shovelling one or more “tunnels” through the snowbank in front of their place of business so that when people got out of their cars they didn’t have to resort to “mountain climbing” to reach the sidewalk and the stores. There was no such thing as the army of trucks, plows, bobcats, human-operated snow shovels, etc. of later years that scraped away just about every snowflake in the business section to be carted away to a dump site. In the mid-20th Century there were still those who put their cars to bed for the winter by removing the wheels and leaving the car sitting on wooden blocks in the garage. They also took the car battery into the house to preserve it until spring.

The built-up area of the Town of Collingwood was much smaller in those days in terms of the number of streets to be cleared and the Works Department seemed to get by most of the time with the grader fitted with a wing plow and a dump truck fitted with two blades for clearing the streets, but after an especially heavy dump of snow some private contractors were also employed. The sidewalks were ploughed by horses dragging a wedge-shaped steel plow followed on foot by a human operator. These plows seldom scraped right down to the concrete, leaving the sidewalks very uneven and treacherous.

In school we had a Christmas Concert, Christmas Exams and then school was out for a couple of weeks that everyone called

the "Christmas Holidays". In 1951 composer Meredith Wilson wrote a song titled *It's Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas*, one of the most famous recordings of which was done by Bing Crosby. One of the lines in the song says, "And Mom and Dad can hardly wait for school to start again" in response to the toy lists of their children "Barney and Ben" and "Janice and Jen". Bing Crosby's mellifluous voice gave little indication of the stress and strain of Christmas shopping lists other than that it would be nice to see the children off to school early in January. This was at a time when Christmas planning began perhaps in early December, not a couple of months before the day as happens currently. The point in time I am writing of did not have credit cards to encourage people to buy things like 75- or 88-inch flat screen televisions that cost more today than some of our parents paid for their house. Many gifts of that era were practical necessities of life: furniture, linens, neckties, slippers, electric appliances for the kitchen, model trains, dolls, radios, record players and sports equipment, to name just a few. Some children in town probably even got an unwanted extra dose of radiation from the shoe fitting fluoroscope machine in McIntosh's Shoe Store when they were fitted with new shoes for Christmas [see my story *Shopping For Shoes With X-Rays*].

Another seasonal song, *Silver Bells*, came out in 1950 and speaks of a season of good will and smiles all around and while it speaks of shoppers rushing home with their treasures,

however the words “Soon it will be Christmas Day” do not necessarily imply a nearly two-month buildup starting the day after Halloween (or before). These two songs joined other seasonal tunes like *Frosty The Snowman* (1950), *Christmas In Killarney* (1950), *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1949), *The Christmas Song* [Chestnuts roasting...] (1945), *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas* (1944), *I’ll Be Home For Christmas* (1943), *White Christmas* (1942), *Winter Wonderland* and *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town* (both in 1934) and *Jingle Bells* (1857—no, that is not a typo!) all of which have become well-loved perennial standards.

All of this was part of the ambience of the Christmas season in small town Collingwood for many years when life did not move at the breakneck speed it does now—a time that exists only in memory and old photographs. Once Christmas and Boxing Day were past there were a few days to relax somewhat before New Year’s Eve/Day rounded out the season and then, Barney, Ben, Janice and Jen were indeed back in school, the Christmas catalogues were thrown out, the Christmas tree was undecorated and put out in the snowbank (usually with a few strands of tinsel still on it) for the Town Works Department to pick up, the decorations were put away for another year and life in town returned to its routine pace.

As Christmas 2018 approaches, it triggers nostalgic memories of the season in the Collingwood of my childhood and youth. I hope readers will enjoy this snapshot of the small town that Collingwood was in the mid-20th Century when it still echoed some aspects of the 19th Century. Merry Christmas to all!

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.