Merry Little Podcast – Christmas and Family History

[intro]

1. Greetings and welcome to the Merry Little Podcast of MyMerryChristmas.com. My name is Jeff Westover, lead storyteller at the Merry Forums of MyMerryChristmas, our little Christmas community that’s now 16 years old as a forum and 29 years old as a website and a merry virtual effort online.

This episode of the Merry Little Podcast is brought to you by TrackingSanta.net, an extension of the oldest Santa tracker online known as SantaUpdate.com. TrackingSanta.net is all about the Map and this year, for the first time ever, there’s a new app coming out for your Android phone called Tracking Santa – what else? If you need Santa on the go this Christmas eve, you’ll want to download the Tracking Santa app. It’s commercial free, family friendly and child safe, as are all our of Santa resources.

If you have listened to the Merry Little Podcast much you know that I tend to blend the research I do of Christmas sometimes with the research we do of Christmas.

They say the two most prevalent Internet hobbies are porn – and family history. And I have no hesitation in admitting that I have been a rabid family historian now for decades.

On my father’s side I have a proud, classic American family history – dating back to the Mayflower and beyond to old world England and Denmark. I have family I’ve found during every key point in American history and their history is also Christmas history. The research of one has aided in the research of the others and I love it.

On my mother’s side is a less defined heritage, one very complicated by both the drama of American wars and civil wars and also by a late 19th century immigrant family who brought a different kind of Christmas with them from the Old World.

Every family historian will tell you that their story would make a whopper of a movie. And it is absolutely true. My love of family history extends to members of my family and my neighborhood who are also exploring their own history. I try to help them start the great project of finding their roots – it is a very daunting task that only gets bigger the more you discover.

It’s natural then to wonder as you discover your roots just what things were like for them – versus how things are for you now. For example, in researching my family I found that a branch of the family living in Massachusetts in the 1770s were loyalists.

This was fascinating to me because they little town they lived in was on the road between Boston and Albany – and a relative’s tavern in that little town was frequently a meeting place for the military on both sides of the conflict.

As I contemplated this I did a little more digging and I found out why they were loyalists. The patriarch of the family was the clerk of the Church of England in that community and you couldn’t just be a rebel if you were a figure in the Church, whose head, of course, was the King of England.

So it came to no surprise to me that one of my great grandfathers got himself hauled in front of a committee and lambasted for not only being a loyalist but for trying to convince others, in the family tavern, of course, that fighting for the colonies was treason.

For this crime he was quite nearly strung up. He was detained, then fined, and then made to enlist in the militia, where, of course he had to fight for the colonies – which he did for about three months. After the war was over, he lit out to Canada where that branch of the family is still flourishing.

That story makes be laugh because it is quite the family trait to not keep our mouths shut when it comes to politics.

But it is likewise very instructive – and endearing, in a way – to get to know our kindred dead through their stories.

And that brings me back to Christmas. Have we any idea of what our Christmas stories mean to our family history? And have we saved those stories so they can be told to later generations?

Well, now. We all know we should do this. In a year like 2020, we are learning far too much how when we lose someone we love we lose intangibles such as their stories, their experiences, their perspectives, and their personalities if we don’t do more than just collecting a few pictures and saving some social media posts.

So this episode of the Merry Little Podcast is both presented for your review but also for a selfish concern: I’m creating here a record for my family of some great Christmas memories.

I know part of my personal record that I will someday leave behind will be all these podcast episodes that I’ve recorded. They contain my voice, my interests and even some of my passions. And I want my grandchildren and greatgrandchildren to have them for all those reasons and more.

Now I would just preface this before I begin with one thing: the stories you are about to hear are just the stuff of living. I think they are completely normal and I’m certain with some of this the response that will be triggered will be, “Yep, I can relate – that happened to me too”. We’re just regular people and we experience just the same magic stuff of Christmas that everybody does.

I’ve decided to share three Christmas memories that I think are completely normal…yet come from a different point of view.

First will be the story of my parent’s first Christmas together, then a memory I have of Christmas as a child in their home, and then a Christmas memory or two I have as a parent – and specifically as a Dad.

After all, the story of MyMerryChristmas – and thus of the Merry Forums and the Merry Little Podcast – IS a family story. Great stories of Christmas always begin with family.

[Christmas story of parents – That’s What Christmas Means to Me – Luke McMaster]

1. That’s new Christmas music from Luke McMaster from his album just released titled Christmas Present. It’s a fun album that you can check out at lukemcmaster.com.

The first thing to know about my Mom and Dad is that they were high school sweethearts and married when quite young. Mom was 17, Dad was 18.

Theirs is a story of worlds colliding. The adage that opposites attract could not be more true than it is with my folks.

My Dad came from a large, boisterous, dynamic family that was steeped in religious and Christmas tradition.

Mother was an only child in a broken family that had no church and never celebrated a Christmas in their life.

In fact, without getting too personal, Christmas for my mother as a child and as a teen was a time of misery. She hated Christmas. She loathed that time of year because it was not a time for children. It was a time for adults to party – and she was left to deal with the aftermath.

So when she and Dad married, and my oldest brother came along just before their first Christmas together is 1960, neither of them knew what to expect or even really what to do. They were living, of course for the first time ever, a thousand miles away from their California upbringing while enduring the first semester of college.

Their first year married was their first time ever away from home.

My Dad went to school and worked as much as he could. Being a college town the best job he could find at the time was as an usher at a movie theater. And how much to do you hear about that kind of job anymore.

There were in a tiny student housing apartment complex in Provo, Utah – dealing with real cold and real snow for the first time. And they had to figure out how Christmas was going to work for them.

Now, my Mom passed away five years ago – this will be our fifth Christmas this year without her. My Dad and I were just conversing the other day about how Mom loved this time of year and how she loved decorating for Christmas. In fact, my memories of my Mom are nothing but magic when I think of my childhood. Mom made it happen.

But it didn’t start out that way. Of course, at the time she was dealing with a new baby, being away from home, and not having Christmas in her life before. She didn’t know what to do that year. She had never decorated a Christmas, let alone go out and get one.

Dad told me that he was able to get a small tree as a donation – because they were so broke. He went to a local drug store and bought small little necessities. I think he said he had about $7 to spend that Christmas and he stretched it as far as he could.

In fact, he told me he likely spent more on the wrapping paper for it all than he did on the little stuff he bought. He got her a favorite candy bar, some bobby pins, a package of rubber pants for the baby, a box of crackers and some other little odds and ends. He even bought her a cheap pair of socks and wrapped up each one in a separate little box.

Unwrapped, Dad had to admit it all looked kind of pathetic. But wrapped up – little things in large boxes stuffed with newspapers – it all looked pretty dog gone festive.

But then came the hard part – getting them under the tree. Mom had no clue what he was up to and he didn’t want her to suspect anything. He just wanted Santa to come and for her to be surprised.

What he did is NO surprise to me. He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. While he was showering he slipped out the tiny bathroom window – barefoot in the snow – and in a tee shirt and trousers only quickly went to the car and retrieved the wrapped stuff.

He went to another window that he had cracked open near the Christmas tree and from outside he put all the presents under the tree. All this time my Mom was supposedly in the bedroom with the baby.

For me, here comes the good part of the story. Mom and Dad had a little dog, given to them as a wedding present from my grandmother. This little dog, who never knew she was not human, heard or sensed Dad outside and went to the window and started barking.

Mother told me she got up to look at what the dog was fussing about and she saw my Dad outside in his bare feet and t-shirt – she thought he was the best looking Santa she had ever seen. She told me she rushed back to the bedroom and put a pillow over her face to keep from laughing out loud.

It’s a classic story of Christmas love on both side – neither knew what the other knew. And it ended up being the Christmas that would influence Christmas for all of us growing up.

[Christmas memory as a kid – Herb Alpert – Sleigh Ride]

1. What you’re hearing is Christmas music from the 1960s from Herb Alpert, a tradition in my house that always played, especially on Christmas Eve. Now because you know the story of my parents, you’ll understand this Christmas story of a great Christmas eve we had when I was about seven.

I’m the middle of five kids – an older brother and sister, and a younger brother and sister. Our Christmas Eves followed a set pattern. There would be great food, games and at the end of the night we would open one present and it was always new, matching PJs. Then we’d read A Visit from St. Nicholas, then the 2nd chapter of Luke and we’d head off to bed, to await the magic of Santa.

I roomed with my two brothers and year round, our room was a sanctuary. Mom hated going in there because we were boys and lived like boys. We were active. We were messy.

But at night our room was a magical place sometimes. We had all kinds of night games we would play because we invariably went to bed early but did not sleep. And never was this more true than on Christmas Eve and my parents knew it.

My Dad tried to help by having a small radio in our room tuned to KWIN in Lodi, California. On Christmas Eve they played music and every hour a guy would announced how far Santa was from Lodi. We stayed up listening to him get closer and closer to the house.

We had bunk beds, me on top and my big brother on the bottom – because he was the big brother. We would have thumb fights and arm wrestling. Mom could hear us get out of bed even if she was 100 miles away so our games always had to be very quiet. But we messed around for hours especially on Christmas Eve.

On this particular Christmas Eve we were up until the guy on the radio said Santa was in town. It was at this quiet critical moment that we started hearing sounds.

From outside we heard kind of a screech, then a thump, and then grunting. One grunt came from my Dad but the other grunt we didn’t recognize. This went on for a while – screech, thump, grunt, then screen, thump and grunt.

All of a sudden, the vaccum cleaner went on. This was the 1970s. We had shag carpet. Mom my not only vaccumed the carpet to clean it but to also get it to look the right way. The vaccum left marks and she wanted it uniform – a kind of 70s OCD thing, I guess you could call it. We even had a carpet rake, if you can believe that, to get the same effect.

But Mom was vaccuming not to do anything to the carpet on this Christmas Eve. Somehow, she was in cahoots with Santa, who clearly had to be the other guy grunting we heard with Dad somehow outside on the sidewalk.

Our bedroom was on the side of the house. We couldn’t see what was going on. Not that we didn’t try. My brother, always the adventurous one, got out of bed and opened the window. He was halfway outside of it with his body nearly to the top of the fence when mom opened the window, snapped her fingers and said “You, close the window and back in bed!”

I don’t know how she did that. I was right there and never heard a sound.

Anyway, for the next 15 minutes or so we heard a lot of grunting and thumping and vacuuming. We didn’t understand it until the morning when we saw this brand new antique torture device known as a piano that had some really rusty wheels.

It wasn’t until years later that I put it together. We helped my neighbor move a dead vehicle…and I heard that grunt again. Now you know the rest of the story…

[Christmas memory as a Dad – The Bells of Christmas – Michael Convertino]

1. Many of you already know the story of how MyMerryChristmas began with the SantaUpdates back in 1991. If you don’t know that story you can read it in the about section at the website. This is a followup to that story and it’s one of my personal all-time favorite Christmas stories.

When the movie The Santa Clause with Tim Allen came out in 1994 my eldest daughter Aubree was then about 8 years old and she was starting to get bullied a bit at school because of her belief in Santa Claus.

On the day we went to see the movie, on the drive over there, Aubree was talking about that and she asked the question every parent dreads: Dad, is Santa Claus real or not?

I didn’t want to answer her directly in that moment because I wanted her to enjoy the movie. We hadn’t seen it yet but this was long planned event and I didn’t want the fun of what it could be spoiled by a real life discussion about hard things. So I kind of asked her questions and re-directed the conversation as best I could.

Now, you have to understand. Aubree was five when I met her and became her Dad. She was the only five year old in the world that I knew who didn’t know the tradition of Santa. So the introduction of Santa Updates had gone far in changing her perspectives and adding to her celebration of Christmas in a good way.

The Santa Updates in those years spoke directly to her. The very first update that she received from the North Pole introduced a character by the name of Bernard, the head of Santa’s workshop. And he is the key to this story.

Well, you’ve all seen the Santa Clause. You know how the story and the look and feel of the movie just sucks you in and is very engaging. And Aubree was most definitely invested.

The theater was packed, as you can imagine on a Saturday in November.

Then came the part of the movie where Bernard, the head elf is introduced.

Aubree shot up out of her chair. She pointed at the screen. “Dad! That’s HIM. That’s BERNARD!”

Well, I knew right then I had her for at least another couple of years. I knew there would be a discussion on the way home and it wouldn’t be about whether or not Santa Claus is real.

What we later found out, years later of course, after Aubrees six siblings came along and she had taught each one of them how to track Santa and all about the Santa Updates, that the name Aubree means “ruler of elves”.

The best part of that story for me now is very personal. Aubree is now 34 years old and after years of trial she finally welcomed her first child into the world just six weeks ago.

And like that a new Santa tracker is born….

[song – Jingle Bells – Jim Brickman]

1. That’s one of the newest creations of the great Jim Brickman from his newest album of 2020 and you can find it at jimbrickman.com.

What are your family stories of Christmas? I guarantee you that the stories you have are just as good or better than these memories I’ve shared here today. And I further guarantee that they will mean more to your family if you will just take your phone, hit record and save those memories for sharing in the years ahead when you’re not around.

You’ll never regret it.

Thanks for joining us here on the Merry Little Podcast and we invite you to come share your stories and more with the community online at the Merry Forums of MyMerryChristmas.com.

And if you enjoyed this episode of the Merry Little Podcast we’d appreciate a review left for us at our website or at ChristmasPodcasts.com or wherever it is you listen to us in the great big world of podcast apps out there.

For all of us at MyMerryChristmas.com this is Jeff Westover wishing you and yours a very merry Christmas.