

The one-room school house and its Christmas Concert! What memories and delights spring from remembering that special night of the year!

It was no secret that teachers were somewhat judged by the Christmas concert they put on. There was competition to be the best, but teachers helped each other, school districts planned the dates so nothing interfered with it, and everyone braved the cold to attend, applaud, and cheer.

My mother taught at a rural school for most of my growing up years. However, my sister and I went to “town” school and could only watch from the sidelines when it came to the Christmas concert. I have fond memories of the concert preparations: a large pot simmering on the stove which turned out to be my brother’s long underwear being dyed brown for the elves’ costumes; being “fitted” for a Wise Man’s crown – a cardboard frame covered in velvet with glued-on cotton and lots of glitter which did, in fact, look like the real thing on that special night; and, of course, the large cutout letters trimmed with gold or silver garland for the ever-present acrostic “M is for ....” to spell out Merry Christmas.

Then, the night of the concert, after all the recitations, skits, songs, and the nativity pageant -- in which every pupil had a part (depending on that year’s enrollment, there may have been a lot of shepherds watching their flocks that night) -- came Santa Claus, as if on cue and no matter how many other stops he had that night! He made his jolly entrance, handed out the gifts with my mom reading the names on the packages, and waved goodbye.

Along with gifts for all the pupils, there was one for my sister and one for me! Much later in life, the memory made me wonder about those gifts and I learned that Eaton’s offered a special mail-order service for these concerts. Shortly after school resumed after the summer holidays, teachers in schools all over Canada received a special order form for the company’s Christmas Tree Shopping Service. The order form was two pages with spaces to fill in the ages and numbers of the boys and girls in the school. The teacher would check off the types and price ranges of the gifts needed, and the money, which was either from the local school board or raised within the community, was enclosed.

The paperwork might specify six books for eight-year-old girls at 25 to 35 cents, or five toys for six-year-old boys at 25 or 35 cents. Gloves or mitts might run about 40 cents, combs or handkerchiefs about 25 cents, and expensive gifts such as a purse for an older girl might run as high as 60 cents. The Eaton’s staff would pick out and gift wrap everything, labeling each by the intended age group and whether suitable for a boy or girl. All the teacher had to do was write the pupil’s name on the tag attached to each gift.

The most important part of the paperwork, though, was the date of the concert to make sure the order was received in plenty of time. Did my mom include my sister and me in the paperwork sent to Eaton’s? No, she had to sneak those gifts under the tree. What about the other families’ pre-schoolers? No, the parents had to bring gifts for their little ones so they wouldn’t be left out. Oh, the wonderful deceit of it all! And the Eaton’s employees who got the job of picking out and wrapping these wonderful treasures for the Eaton’s Christmas Tree Shopping Service – I do hope they enjoyed their part in the rural Christmas concert.