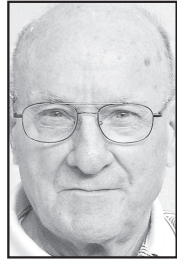


Particular Christmas changed my outlook

Man of the Plains

Tom Dreiling



My little sister asked Santa Claus a question back in 1941 that changed the way this 'Man of the Plains' looked at Christmas from that time going forward. And at 77 I've done a lot of forwarding.

Our home was located in the 300 block of West 15th Street in Hays, two blocks north of the former St. Anthony's Hospital. A beautiful Christmas tree, a real live Christmas tree, I might add, with colorful bulbs and silver tinsel hanging from each branch, was the centerpiece of the living room.

On this particular Christmas eve, my older siblings were again looking forward to Santa's arrival, not for themselves, but for the reaction of the three youngest members of the family: Mary, myself and Jim. We were 4, 7 and 8, and Santa Claus was a big deal to Mary and me; Jim was a question mark. The older siblings, Norbert, Donald, Dean, Dolores (Tootsie), Gene and JoAnn were non-believers of this guy dressed in red and white, wearing black boots, flying all over the place in a sleigh guided by reindeer, and with a white beard blowing around his face and obstructing his vision, but they did us youngsters the courtesy of not revealing what they knew!

We gathered around the tree on the Christmas eve in question, and under the direction of Dad, organist and choir director for many years at St. Joseph's Church on West 13th Street, played the piano while we sang Christmas carols, awaiting the "Ho! Ho! Ho!" of Santa Claus.

The stage was set. The presents were colorfully-wrapped and carefully placed under the Christmas tree. We always opened our gifts on Christmas eve, not Christmas morning. The little voice in my head teased me by asking this question, "Hey, Tommy, if Santa is the one who brings presents, why are they already under your tree?" Hmm, food for thought, I thought.

A few days before that Christmas eve, I told brother Jim what the voice in my head was saying. Jim, I learned, was not a firm believer, thanks to his buddies. Some of them told him that Santa was just something imaginary. But they warned him not to let on because if he did there would probably be no presents under the tree for him. Jim wasn't about to take that chance.

With nine kids and Mother and Dad, the bounty under the tree was modest. There were gifts that fit the requests of the three little people in the family, while the big kids were to receive some clothing and paper sacks filled with homemade fudge, store-bought hard candy, peanuts, a popcorn ball and an orange or apple.

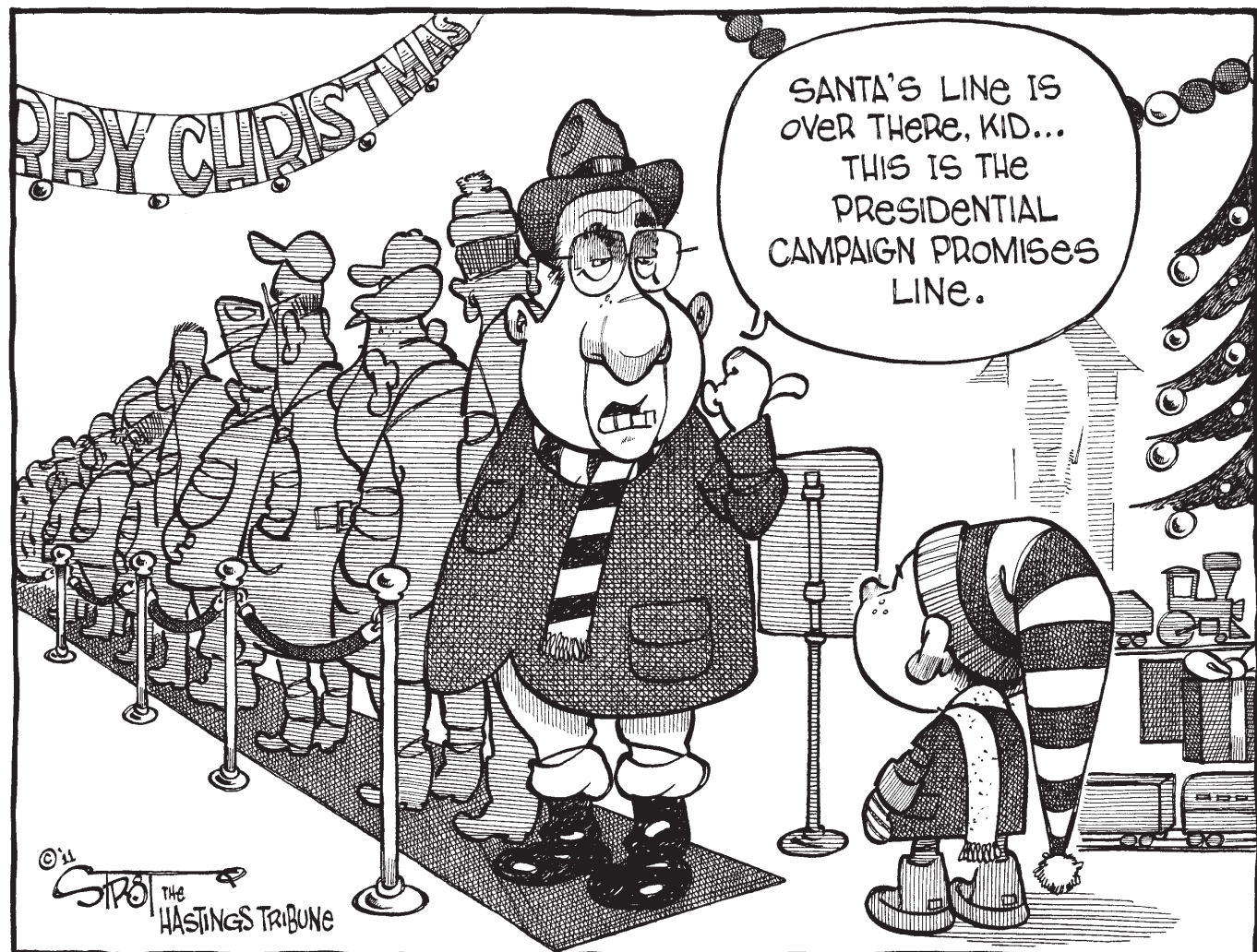
Santa knew exactly when to bang on our door and holler, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Dad acted really surprised, and hesitated a minute or two before letting him in. The tall, skinny-looking, worn-out Santa asked that old traditional question, "Were you good boys and girls this year?" Like a chorus at a dress rehearsal, we all shouted, "Yes, Santa!" Jim was the loudest shouter! Santa then handed out the gifts from under the tree. As this was going on, the voice in my head said, "See, Tommy, he didn't bring you anything again. Your Mom and Dad bought that stuff!"

The voice was beginning to make sense. Little sister Mary was standing next to Santa and looking him over, head to toe. In a polite voice and as sincere as she could be, she asked Santa Claus, "Santa, why are you wearing Daddy's slippers?" Santa, obviously not prepared for that question, cleared his throat a couple of times, managed to yell, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" and exited the place like it was on fire!

That was the Christmas that sealed the deal for me: there was no Santa! The voice in my head said, "Well, Tommy, welcome to the club!" It took Mary a couple more years before she came to terms with the Santa issue.

Oh, who was wearing Dad's slippers on that Christmas eve in 1941? All these years later, I still don't know.

Because this is my last column of 2011, I take this opportunity to wish you a Merry Christmas, or Happy Holidays, and a Happy New Year! Peace!



I like brain teasers only if I get them all right

An old friend called the other day to say my column about the tumbleweed Christmas tree brought back many fond memories for him.

Rodney and I attended the same little country school. His sister, Mary, was in my class and is still one of my dearest friends. He was the oldest child in a large family and like most country families, they were long on love, but short on cash.

He recalled how he and his brother found a nicely shaped fireweed, spray painted it white and set about making decorations for it. He said one of his uncles took tin can lids and with a pair of tin snips began to cut spiral "icicles." These were sprayed red, green and silver. His grandmother made a chain of cranberries and popcorn.

Those are the memories that make up the fabric of life. Not what presents we got or gave. But, being together with family and friends.

Jim's sister, Mary, sends me cute e-mails. The last one she sent, though, just made me feel dumb. It was a list of "trick" questions. Most I got right. Like: Johnny's mother had three children. The first child was named April. The second child was named May. What was the third child's name? Well, it was Johnny's mother, right? So the third child was Johnny.

Another was: Which is correct to say, "The yolk of the egg are white," or, "The yolk of the egg is white?" Nei-

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



ther. The yolk of an egg is yellow.

The one that got me (and Mary admitted to missing it, too) was the question: In California, you cannot take a picture of a man with a wooden leg. Why not?

The answer: You can't take a picture with a wooden leg. You need a camera to take pictures.

I like little "brain teasers". But, only if I can get them all right.

I am going to walk all over my Christmas present. It's beautiful; it's natural; it's long and lean; and came in 34 separate boxes. It's my new hardwood floor. This is something we've been saving for; waiting for; and longing for for several years.

I believe in delayed gratification. If it's worth having, it's worth waiting for. Besides, I'm cheap. I would rather wait 'til I have the money than pay for it twice with interest charges. That's, of course, the reason why our house remodel has taken so long. We haven't done a thing, unless it was paid for.

Anyway, Jim began laying the floor,

starting in the dining room. This is no small task because all the "stuff" we had stored in the office got relocated to a wall in the dining room. Now, that "stuff" has to be moved out of the way. As the new floor inches forward it has to be moved again to a space on the finished floor. It becomes a "leap frog" project. I think the "stuff" will magically find its way to the basement. Like I've said before, "We cannot open the boxes in the basement as well as we cannot open them upstairs."

Just a few more batches of caramel corn and I'll be able to pack away the hot air popper. In its place, however, is the chocolate melter. A handy little unit since I dip so many goodies in chocolate. Saturday I dipped 115 Butterfinger Balls; Sunday night I dipped about a jillion pretzel sticks.

What's left to make? Peanut brittle, sunflower seed brittle, Christmas wreaths (made with marshmallows, corn flakes and green food coloring), minted walnuts and spicy-sugared nuts. Maybe a few other things, but I'll be happy if I get all that done.

We will be seeing our kids, all of them, during Christmas week. This is a first. For once, I don't have to mail boxes.

I hope you are enjoying this Christmas season and remembering the reason for it. Feliz Navidad.

Americans have access to the best food in the world

It's holiday time and while Thanksgiving has passed, Christmas and New Year's Day are just around the corner. That means all sorts of good tasting food - roast turkey, bread stuffing, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, wine and pumpkin pie.

What better time than during this festive period to give thanks for the most wholesome food supply in the world. Yes, Americans enjoy one of the best food supplies in the world not only in terms of abundance, variety and cost, but also in terms of safety.

A closer look at a typical dinner menu reveals that Mother Nature and her chemicals will be joining all of us who partake of the traditional holiday fare in this country. In a typical soup-to-nuts holiday menu, here are some of the natural chemicals which in large quantities could be hazardous to a person's health, according to the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). Such effects would occur only if the concentrated substances were consumed in excess.

Saying this is not intended to frighten some who are already chemical phobic in our country. For centuries humans have eaten potentially toxic substances that occur naturally in food.

The natural and man-made toxins, carcinogens and mutagens in the U.S. food supply remain so small that they pose no known health hazard, the ACSH reports. A toxic dose of caffeine requires 96 cups of coffee and you would have to eat 3.8 tons of turkey this holiday season to deliver a toxic

Insight

John Schlageck



dose of malonaldehyde.

Mushroom soup, for example, contains hydrazines, which are potent animal carcinogens. A fresh vegetable tray is chalked full of nitrates. The main entrée, roast turkey with stuffing and cranberry sauce, contains heterocyclic amines and malonaldehyde, eugenol and furan derivatives, according to the ACSH.

It's way past time for the American public to stop acting on the presumption that "natural" is safe and "man made" is always suspect. While both can be toxic in excess, present scientific knowledge indicates neither natural nor man-made food chemicals are hazardous in the quantities we consume on a daily, monthly or yearly basis.

Toxins, carcinogens and mutagens are everywhere in Mother Nature's food supply. It is unwise to panic over minute levels of man-made chemicals such as the traces of pesticide residues occasionally detected.

According to ACSH, one mushroom has an estimated relative cancer hazard 167 times greater than the daily dietary intake of the chemicals PCB and EDB. The relative cancer hazard of alcohol in 8.45 ounces of wine is 78 times that

of saccharin in diet cola and 1175 times the hazard from trichloroethylene in one liter of water from the most contaminated well in Silicon Valley California.

If there is a health problem we should be concerned about during this upcoming holiday season, it may be overeating. If you don't watch yourself you can gobble down more than 2,000 calories easily at one sitting. It doesn't take a food scientist from ACSH to tell you you'll wind up stuffed like a turkey if you eat like that during the holiday season.

As most of us know, excessive eating has been called the "most striking" carcinogen ever discovered in rodent carcinogenicity studies. In other words, "fat rats get cancer."

Remember, when you sit down at the holiday table this season, leave that last leg of turkey or piece of pie for someone else. You don't have to eat every last roll on the plate, and yes, Fido, the family dog, might enjoy those last three or four spoons of gravy.

Eat moderate quantities of a wide variety of foods this holiday season and throughout the entire year. Despite the presence of Mother Nature's toxins, they are not dangerous when consumed in moderation as part of a balanced, varied diet.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

THUMBS UP! Thumbs up to the Methodist Church for their Living Nativity. It was fantastic. Called in. Thumbs up to Darla for giving me a ride home on an icy morning. Thank you! Called in.

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