

A Christmas Tradition

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Christmas morning in 1954 was a joyous mixture of giving and receiving, along with a little gift score-tallying. A kid's rating system that was more than just adding up points to decide a winner; it was about the comfort of a tradition.

My family lived in a modest, I would guess about eight-hundred-square-foot, two-bedroom house just like all of the other houses on East Northrup Drive in Midwest City, Oklahoma. The first streets laid in the new, small, but expanding town were named after generals, local VIPs, airplane companies and other references that somehow linked with the massive air force base just to the south. Most residents had some direct connection with Tinker Field—usually, at least one family member worked there.

They were mostly lower-income families with the greatest of expectations for their futures and the future of the country. And there was a sense of oneness, based on the rather homogeneously white Christian population, with a strong influence of puritanical attitudes and old-time, Oklahoma farmer resilience. Bigotry existed, if kept under the surface—although not far under. Luxuries weren't normal and more often than not were measured by an abundance of food in the pantry. Authority was respected and schools were honored. School Christmas plays, with mangers and wise men, were traditional and well attended. Almost all people went to church on Sundays, whether they believed or not.

For most, Christmas morning meant gifts—often many, many gifts. The feeling of great optimism about the future gave people the courage to over-spend, even if their Depression-era

parents wouldn't have approved. Within this bubble of innocence and joy was the score-keeping. Which kid on the block, or maybe a couple of streets over, got the most and the best gifts? We developed a ratings system. Electric train sets were a ten. Apples and oranges, a definite one. And of course the dreaded grandmother bag of nuts, a zero. The system was devised by little boys. Girls weren't involved.

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My competitors were Donny, Ernie, Bill, Bobby and Johnny. Sometimes some other kids were involved, but we were the core group. Bill was always the hard one to figure. In either a fortunate or unfortunate occurrence, Bill was born on December 24th, so his birthday and the birthday of Jesus were almost the same. His parents claimed he still received the same number of birthday gifts as any kid born in August but, of course, Bill knew that wasn't true. They would separate them and mark some birthday and some Christmas, but Bill suspected his mother just divided 'em in half without much thought. So, how to keep score? It was decided after lengthy discussion that Bill could decide which were birthday and which were Christmas—not his mother. Everyone trusted Bill. He was the fat kid in our group—although he wasn't really all that fat—which somehow, to the poorly developed brains of little boys, made him a truth teller. Plus, Bill had a little brother named Timmy, who everyone hated. We had great sympathy for the burdens Bill had to endure.

The other exception was Ernie. He lived several blocks off of the street everyone else lived on. We perceived that Ernie's parents were poor because Ernie mostly got hand-me-down clothes, new socks, new underwear and candy. In kid terms, not much value, depending on the candy, but because kids have an innate sense of fairness, the rating system allowed higher points for things like gloves and hats. So, if Ernie struck a glove-hat gold mine, he could still win.

Ernie also was a genius. All the other students and, of course, the teachers knew that. Since he was so smart, he wasn't allowed to decide much, because he had an unfair advantage. It was the beginning of a formal society structure in which smart kids stood by and watched the dumb kids mess things up.

My job was clear. I gathered the facts. This was due to my parent's lenient attitude toward me leaving the house and visiting my friends on Christmas Day. Both my mom and dad worked—not the typical family at the time. My dad worked two jobs, one at Tinker and the other at a local shoe store. Christmas was a day off for them, and they didn't have many of those. Besides their desire for peace and quiet, the neighborhood was absolutely safe. Kids were out and about all the time, without supervision. Parents of that time would have thought it odd to “watch” their kids play.

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There had been two big incidents in the neighborhood for as long as anyone could remember. One was when the bootlegger, who lived one street over, was arrested. Everyone knew where the bootlegger lived, but it was still a shock when the police arrested the man. Selling booze was illegal, but most fathers thought he hadn't harmed anyone. “Don't the police have better things to do than hassle our neighbors?” various of them, some of whom were customers, asked.

The other was a suicide.

Across the street and two doors down from my house was a family no one really knew. They had a grown son who lived with them, but never spoke to anyone, or even waved. The parents were retired military, and seemed very old. The gossip speculated the son was staying

with his parents because he had legal problems, based on absolutely nothing other than the willful and unfounded claims of Mrs. Peters. According to my mother, Mrs. Peters read way too many books, and had extreme ideas. I heard my mother whisper to my father that she had a whole bookcase full of romance novels. *Sin did* exist in Midwest City.

One day the grown son parked his almost new Chevrolet in the one-car garage, and started the engine. His mother found him hours later, and emitted a blood-curdling scream before she collapsed. Within a very short time the police arrived to set up a blockade of patrol cars and uniformed officers stationed around the small house. No one saw the father that day, but the mother was taken away in an ambulance. Other vehicles arrived and, while observed by everyone in the neighborhood, the son's body was removed. Shortly after, the parents moved out. It was said the father had been put in a nursing home. The house stayed vacant for many years, even after my family moved to a bigger house.

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My first journey on Christmas morning 1954 was to Bill's. Start with the most difficult and work towards the easiest was a philosophy that served me well long after Christmas Day gift-auditing duties. Bill was prepared. He had a list made, with estimated value points. He had definitely hit the Christmas gift jackpot with a *Giant Erector Set*, the one with a functioning elevator. On top of that, he got a new baseball glove. He was sitting pretty. We argued some and debated, but he won me over and we agreed his score was a whopping forty-two—a record.

Next up was Ernie. I hadn't been inside his house all that much, but whenever I was, it was always a warm feeling. His mother was very small and polite, more like a grandma than a mom. His dad stayed outside in their garage where he had a woodworking shop. He made

things, like tables and bookcases, and sold them at a small flea market near the fair grounds. Not sure he had a job. He had never said anything to me. Ernie stepped outside wearing a new stocking cap and some impressive gloves. This was going to be a very competitive year. Ernie was grinning like he was about to explode, he had something hidden behind his back. “It is a miracle. I finally got one.” He seemed in awe. I had no idea what he was talking about. He brought it forward and showed me. I still didn’t know what it was.

“It’s a slide rule.”

This had never been listed on the kids’ scale of gifts. But, no doubt, even I knew this was on the same scale as an erector set. After some thought, I offered my opinion on value. Ernie looked offended. He began a dissertation that covered more words than I had ever heard him say. He talked about adding, subtracting, division, most of which I sort of understood, but then he mentioned logarithms, roots and powers, and trigonometry. The words lost meaning. This was in another league. Just based on the look on Ernie’s face, the slide rule had to be the best genius boy gift of all time. Without further hesitation, I declared the gift score, including the gloves and hat, at an astronomical seventy-five. Contest over. No one could beat this—except maybe if someone got a motor scooter. Congratulations were due to Ernie and his poor parents, for they had reached the highest gift score of all time. Ernie was beaming as I left.

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What was I going to say to Bobby? *Don’t even show me your gifts—you’ve lost.* Wow, life was tough. Bobby lived on Northrup, but he lived across Key Boulevard, a major two-lane street right through the heart of the little city. My parents never forbade me to go across Key,

but many kids on my street couldn't. "Too much traffic" was often their parents' reason. As far as I knew, the people weren't different on that side.

Bobby was all about sports. He had no interest in anything else. So, naturally, his also "only interested in sports" parents bought him sports gifts. These, of course, had great value in kids' scoring. But Bobby was hard to deal with. He was ultra-competitive. If I assigned eight to a new football, Bobby would insist it was eleven. If I said eleven, he would demand fifteen. Unless he won, he wouldn't agree on any number. Since I had dealt with Bobby before, I knew what to do. That year he got a new basketball. I told him it was an eight; he insisted it was a ten. I really thought it could be a fifteen, but he won at ten. We bargained away for some time, with him winning every battle. He was all smiles. He was the victor. His grand total was thirty-two, but he was ecstatic because he'd bested me in every negotiation. None of us played sports games with Bobby, one reason being that he was much better than we were. But mostly, it was just not much fun.

Once I was back across Key Boulevard, I felt more relaxed. It was only thirty feet of pavement, but it was a real barrier—at least, in my head. Johnny's house was next. His mom was a schoolteacher, and she yelled a lot. Most of her yelling was directed at her husband, who always seemed to be leaving. Sometime later, when we were in junior high, he left one morning and never returned.

Johnny was the class clown. He lived for only one thing—to make you laugh. His biggest problem was that he wasn't very funny. We used to walk down Key to a small shopping center, and buy things at the drug store or just gawk at things in the hobby store. There were times in the summer that we would make the journey every day. On each trip, we would pass a dry cleaner shop that had a woman sitting at a desk, facing the sidewalk. Apparently, she was

the bookkeeper. Each time we passed, Johnny would put his face on the glass and blow. That made an ugly face, and it seemed to upset the woman. It also left an unsightly mess on the window. She didn't think it was funny, and I didn't think it was funny, but Johnny thought it was hilarious. After a while, when the woman saw us coming, she would get up and go to the back of the shop, no doubt hiding from the hideous creature who made faces and smeared her window. Even if she left, Johnny did his face thing, and laughed. One day a man came out—he might have been the owner; he didn't say—and told Johnny to clean up that mess, or he was calling the cops. He also let Johnny know that he knew his mother. With no reason that anyone could have figured out, Johnny jumped around and made monkey noises at the man, and then ran off. It was obvious to me that Johnny had just insulted the man, but the man seemed unsure what to do. He looked at me as if I might have an answer. I had none. He went inside, and I went home. From that day forward we would walk on the other side of the street, and only cross over once we reached the hobby store. All Johnny ever said about that day was that the man had called his mother and threatened to have him arrested for damaging his window—he said “defacing,” but must have meant something else. In a very strange way, Johnny seemed to think all of that was funny.

Christmas had never been a big event at Johnny's house. They had a tree, but it was only slightly decorated, and they had very few gifts. Johnny had never won the Christmas gift rating game. He didn't seem to care, but it was hard to tell for sure. His biggest gift that year was cowboy boots. That could rank pretty high on the kid's scale, but he said they were hand-me-downs from a cousin who lived in the country. Better luck next year, Johnny.

Donny's house was next. Donny was a year, or maybe a year and half, older than the rest of us. He was the toughest, meanest kid in the neighborhood: and usually very sad. When Donny's dad was home he seemed to drink and yell; a lot. Donny had told his pals that his dad drank gin. Nobody knew what gin was, but it didn't sound good, and on occasions when his dad did try to talk to us, it didn't smell good, either. His dad didn't seem to have a regular job, but would be gone for long periods of time, doing something. When his dad was gone, Donny's house was much happier. But then his dad would return. His dad told everyone who would listen how horrible it was that the bootlegger was arrested. By his own account, the man was one of the best people in "the whole damn state." We all knew he wasn't supposed to say "damn," but didn't have the courage to tell him.

Donny had a sister, Betty. Betty was in high school and was a cheerleader. Betty was the most beautiful person who lived on our street. She also had no modesty. All the houses in the neighborhood had one bathroom, and that was a major problem for her. She needed her own bathroom, maybe two. She was always dressing and "getting herself ready," whatever that really meant. This mysterious process seemed to involve her running around the house looking for some key aspect of being "ready" while in her bra and slip. It didn't seem to matter who was in the house; her needs were paramount over any other considerations. Donny's little boy friends sat around the tiny living room with their mouths agape and their eyes wide open.

Donny's family seemed to have lots of money, judging mostly by all the food they had; and although we didn't know, we suspected gin wasn't cheap either. Christmas was a confusing place at Donny's house. They didn't have a tree, but they did have presents. They weren't church-going people, but they wished everyone a Merry Christmas. Donny had participated in past gift ratings, but each year he became meaner. Bill even told me he was afraid of Donny, and

didn't want to be around him anymore. Donny's anger at everyone seemed to come and go with the departure and return of his dad. Even if Betty was an attraction for his buddies, Donny preferred to stay outside. He would play basketball from morning to late night on most summer days.

As I approached Donny, I could see he was in a bad mood. "Nothin' this year, you little creep." It looked like Donny had been crying. I asked him if he wanted to play a game of horse. He told me to get lost. I left.

Now it was my turn. I knew I had gotten some great gifts, but nothing was going to beat Ernie. The look on his face when he showed me that slide rule said it all—he was the winner in more ways than just the kid's gift-rating game. I gave myself a twenty-five and conceded defeat to the smiling Ernie.

As I walked into my warm, cozy home, I knew the gift game was history. Something had changed. Maybe it was just everybody getting older, or maybe, getting wiser. In years past, each one would have joined me to go to the next. By the time we reached my house, the whole group would be together, and we would be laughing. That day, nobody was really that interested except, I guess, me.

Bill had to stay home and watch Timmy play with his Christmas stash. Ernie couldn't take the slide-rule outside, and he didn't want to leave it, just yet. Bobby said his mother told him he couldn't cross Key anymore without an adult—there had been a scare a couple of days ago, with a kid almost hit on his bike. Johnny was grounded for two weeks because he had fixed himself French toast while his mom was out shopping, and almost burned the house down.

Donny was angry at everyone and seemed dangerous, and no longer wanted any of us “creeps” around his house.

Kid’s games, by their nature, stop at some point. You stop being a kid. I never won the kid’s Christmas gift-rating game. It had usually been Bill, because we trusted him to allocate his huge load of gifts between the two celebration days. Donny had won once, back when he was friendlier, when he got a complete football uniform, with shoulder pads and a helmet. He was happy that day. Ernie, of course, got the prize with his beloved slide-rule, even though none of us really knew what it did. Bobby didn’t win, but often came in second. Johnny had been close one year with a pogo stick, but lost to Bill and his new bike.

Now I can see it wasn’t the winning. It was that we all got together and laughed. It was fun to be together and talk about the gifts and argue about the scores. It was a tradition—a Christmas tradition. I will miss that.