

## The Wayfaring Stranger

My family instilled in me the appreciation of family traditions. Especially during the holidays, I like to share the customs my grandparents handed down to me “from the old country” with my children and grandchildren.

Christmas Day always meant a house filled with friends and family from near and far, good music, and good food. But Christmas Eve, that was a close family celebration. The evening began with the family trekking to church through the snow, listening to the account of the first Christmas, and singing Christmas Carols with the sweet tones of the old pipe organ.

We returned home to the luscious aroma of honey baked ham and a banquet fit for royalty. The stockings on the mantle were bulging with tangerines and walnuts and candy canes. The most beautiful sight of all was the lighted Christmas tree with shimmering presents towering around it.

We ate our late-night feast reminiscing about the good times we shared as a family and how blessed we were. There was always an extra chair and place setting at the table, and a fire on the hearth. I remember my grandmother telling me, that’s so if a hungry wayfaring stranger comes by, he can eat with us and warm himself up by the fire.

After devouring our Christmas delicacies, we sat in front of the fire as Dad read the account of the first Christmas from the bible that once belonged to his father. By then it was midnight, time for the most cherished moment of the entire evening. We would delicately remove the porcelain baby Jesus from Mother’s cedar chest and place it on the mantle completing the nativity scene commemorating the birth of the savior.

Finally, each of us would open one gift, and it was off to bed to dream about what might be in all those other packages we would be tearing into in the morning before all the friends and relatives arrived.

These Christmas traditions always meant a lot to me, but even so much more when a very special Christmas changed my destiny forever.

Our children were seven and eight at the time. We, of course, carried on with these customs, and they clearly enjoyed them as much as I always had. I remember it was a particularly snowy Christmas Eve. We had only been home from the Christmas Eve service for a few minutes. The children were hanging their snowy coats and mittens by the fire to dry, and I was putting the final touches on our Christmas bounty.

There was an unexpected knock at the door. My husband opened the door to greet an old gentleman with snow covering the shoulders of his overcoat. When he tipped his hat, snow fell from the brim. "How do you do?" the kindly old gentleman said. "My name is Legna, and I noticed your lights on as I was passing by. Can you spare a meal for a hungry wayfaring stranger?"

When I heard those words, I glanced at the extra place setting. It was a good tradition...in theory...but to let an actual stranger in my house?!?

The children's eyes lit up when they heard his words and thought that extra chair might be filled this year. "Oh, Boy!" they exclaimed in unison.

My husband looked at me, and I looked at him, and before we knew it, we were inviting this kindly looking old gentleman into our home. He hung his hat by the fire and removed his overcoat to reveal a neatly pressed suit and festive red bowtie.

You would think having a stranger share in what had always been intimate family moments would be awkward, but there was something very familiar about him. Mr. Legna brought a certain delight to the table. It was as if he were part of the family. Although he did not say much about himself, he seemed to truly relish hearing the great family moments we boasted of.

As we were giggling over the memories of some Christmas past, Mr. Legna looked at his watch and said, "Oh my, it's almost midnight" with a hint of anticipation in his voice.

"Let's gather around the fire," Dad invited, picking up his bible.

"Do you mind if I read it this year?" Mr. Legna humbly asked Dad.

Dad smiled as he passed him the old bible. "Please, you're our guest."

Mr. Legna opened the bible to the account of the birth of Jesus. Oh, how he smiled when he read about the angel, Gabriel, announcing to the virgin, Mary that she would have a child that would be called the Son of God.

His eyes glistened and he nodded his head when he read the passages of the angel telling Joseph in a dream to take Mary as his wife, the child was conceived of the Holy Ghost, and He should be called Jesus, for He shall save people from their sins.

His smile widened while reading about when Mary was great with child, Caesar Augustus made a decree that all the world should be taxed, and she travelled with Joseph to Bethlehem. He laid the bible on his lap and looked toward heaven said, "but there was no room at the inn, so she gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger."

There was such an excitement in his voice as he declared how the angels brought the good news of the savior's birth to the shepherds and instructed them to hurry to Bethlehem where they would find Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. As Mr. Legna relayed the vivid description of the glory that filled the sky that night as the angels gave praises to God his face shone. Then he paused and bowed his head. He smiled and nodded. It seemed as though he was reminiscing.

He raised his head. With the kindest look I believe I have ever seen, he gently said "Most people stop there, but that's just the beginning. You see, Jesus grew to be a perfect man. He lived a perfect life. He showed compassion. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. Why He even raised the dead. Even though He had done nothing wrong to deserve it, He was nailed to a cross and shed His blood and died on Calvary. But He didn't stay dead. He rose on the third day, and later ascended to heaven. His death was to take the punishment for the sins of the people of this world. If you believe that in your heart, and are sorry for your sins, and ask Jesus to forgive you, and with His help turn from your sin, when this life is over you can have a home in heaven."

Everyone's eyes were filled with tears as my whole family fell to our knees and asked Jesus to forgive us. It was as if He gave us all a new life. A wonderful, fresh, clean life with heaven as our final destination.

After praying with us, Mr. Legna thanked us for our hospitality and bid us adieu. As he walked through the door, he tipped his hat and said "Remember, If you never see me again here, someday you'll see me in heaven."

So filled with joy, we barely spoke for a few moments. Then my husband suddenly spoke out "That's it," as if a light bulb had just come on over his head. "I thought I had seen Mr. Legna somewhere before. I remember seeing him when I was in the army. He wasn't in my platoon, and I didn't know him, but when I was in one of the fiercest battles, I remember him fighting right there next to me."

My son said "Oh yeah, I saw once him too. He was my substitute school bus driver one day last winter."

My daughter chimed in "and he was at the hospital when Grandpa had his heart attack. He told me Grandpa was going to be okay."

My mind went back to the day when as a small child, I wandered away and fell in the creek. A man jumped in and carried me to safety. It was his face I was looking into.

We still enjoy our Christmas traditions and part of our conversation at our feast each year contains memories of Mr. Legna. We wondered if he was an angel. Would one of God's mighty heavenly beings take the form of a kindly old

man to share the love of Jesus with our family? I don't really know. But I do know that I learned the real meaning of Christmas from a wayfaring stranger in a red bowtie.

Merry Christmas!