

The true mission of Christmas is portrayed in this story and how others celebrate Christmas. Eventually it seems that the stars in heaven illuminate and shows how you don't need money to celebrate a wonderful gift, you just need your friends and family.

At the Mission

I might almost begin my story by "once upon a time," so long is it since my first Christmas in Alberta, forty-four years ago, [1865], at the little settlement of Victoria overlooking the Saskatchewan.

On Christmas Eve the snow had fallen covering the earth with a mantle of white, and the next morning when the sun broke forth, it shone brilliantly on the cluster of houses which formed the settlement, and on the mission house, and mission church on the outskirts, while across the river rose the fir clad banks of the Saskatchewan glistening in the sunshine. It seemed as if the world were singing for sheer joy, "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas" while over the prairies rang the mission bell with its glad tidings, "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to men."

The mission church and schoolhouse combined was a log structure, whitewashed without, and boarded

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within, where everything was of the most primitive nature, though that day evergreens took away from the austerity of the room. Long wooden benches, without backs, seated the people, and at one end of the building a platform was erected from which the missionary looked down from the pulpit, built by the mission carpenter. It was a strange congregation that greeted him, Indians, half-breeds and whites. The year before a number of Red River half-breeds had followed him to settle down beside the mission that their children might be educated. They were there with their families. Among them sat a professor and his son, a squaw whose wrinkled face and drooping form told a

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story of deprivation and hardship, the prospector from the gold mine, an Indian brave in his war paint, and beside him his favorite wife and child, visitors from Hudson's Bay forts, Plain Crees, Wood Crees, all listening to the old story of the Christ child. There were some who heard it for the first time, and to all, I think, it came with freshness and a new interest. Away out there on the prairies hundreds of miles from the nearest civilization, Christmas had not lost its old meaning.

The service over, "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas" was heard on every side, and with many a handshake and good wishes, each departed to his own home.

Our Christmas would have seemed strange to many people. No Christmas tree, for there was nothing to put on it; no Christmas gifts, for there were none to buy, and nothing to make them of. Even the Christmas turkey was missing. Indeed it was difficult to get up a dinner one thousand miles away from the nearest town, no butcher, no baker, no grocer, all the people depended upon coming from St. Paul, Minnesota, or London, England. A bag of flour cost thirty dollars, and we had only two for that year, all the missionary could buy at Fort Garry the previous summer. White flour, indeed, was a luxury, kept for sickness, holidays, or Sundays, barley flour being used in its stead.

Buffalo meat, turnips, potatoes, plum pudding and barley cake a novel Christmas dinner! But if the minds of the guests traveled back to more sumptuous feasts the simple meal in no way lost by the comparison. For there were good appetites and grateful hearts for what was really a royal repast in those days, and throughout all was infused that spirit which alone makes a "Merry Christmas."

The mission house, like the church, was of logs, whitewashed without and boarded within, amply fortified against the severest winds. Down the centre of the dining-room was a long table, homemade, as were the chairs ranged around it. Bright pictures from magazines which had found their way across the continent from the Old Land decorated the walls, while buffalo robes strove to hide the bareness of the wooden floors. But best of all was the huge open fireplace with its blazing, crackling logs, the flames roaring up the wide chimney, defying Jack Frost, and crying "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas" to the bright faces around the board.

It was a merry party. At the head of the table sat the missionary, still in the prime of life, his genial face beaming with the hospitality he loved to exercise, and, opposite him, at the far end of the long table, his pretty wife who had left all the comforts of the East to share in his great work, the Christianizing of the North West. Besides their family of nine, four Hudson's Bay officers were spending the holidays with them, which was not only a welcome respite from the hardships of their lives, but which also added greatly to the enjoyment of the party.

After dinner came outdoor games, racing, throwing the hammer, tug-of-war, and football, not the football of today with its bitter rivalry, but governed by the spirit of good fellowship and played with all the zest of boys let loose from school, for life, a stern taskmaster to these men granted them but little recreation. For did not their necessities and comforts depend on their own exertions? A buffalo hunt on the plains no doubt was good sport fraught with the danger all men love, but it also meant food and warmth for their families. They built their own homes, made their own furniture, hauled the great logs that glazed on their hearths, often plowed their own fields, ground their own grain, and, at the same time, attended to their own particular line of work, that which had lured them from their Eastern homes.

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Then came the sleigh drive. It was not a matter of going into a stable to harness a willing horse. Our drivers were in no one place, but scattered here and there round the mission, basking in the sunshine, playing at rough and tumble with one another, or barking at an occasional passerby. "Here Jumbo, here!" And Jumbo might obey. If not, then proceeded a chase and a scramble, and the unwilling dog was captured to be harnessed with his better behaved brothers.

When all was in readiness, the dogs were driven up to the door.

The driver of each team stood on the back of his cariole, from which he commanded his dogs by word, not using the reins to guide them, but to hold them back if they were going too fast, or in case of his cariole being upset to keep the dogs from getting away, and so leaving him destitute on the prairie. The carioles were very much like a long box, lying flat on the snow, with the front curled up toboggan-like, and capable of holding one person.

As we came out of the house carrying our robes, well warmed beside the fire, the dogs were growing restless. How eager they were for the run, moving to one side, then to the other, their beaded blankets sparkling in the sun! Wrapped in our robes, and tucked cozily into our carioles, away we flew over the prairies. Jingle, jingle, jingle, went the bells, ringing out their music across the snow. Oh! The exhilaration of those old drives! Bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and the merriest laughter, uphill, down dale, through a fairyland of frosted trees - oh! Those were the good old days!

A cry rang out, and turning we saw one of the carioles go over, the occupant an indiscriminate bundle of furs, and the driver, still holding the reins, being dragged through the snow. The dogs soon stopped, the cariole was righted, and the two unfortunates laughed out of all countenance. Then off we sped again on the home run, back to the welcome fireside, where fresh logs had been piled to greet our return.

When night fell, we found our way back to the little church, then lighted for a concert, which had been in preparation for several weeks, and in which the children, as well as the older members of the community, took part. Speeches were made, and songs were sung to the accompaniment of a little harmonium, the first musical instrument brought into the West, the West including Winnipeg, and bought by the missionary from Bishop Anderson, first Bishop of Rupert's Land. Stories were told of

past Christmas days, bright pictures of happy times, but none there would really have bartered the merriest of them for that one which was then drawing to a close, and I know there are those still living that would gladly live it over again.

At last the day was ended, and the people wended their way homeward, some to the little settlement, others to their tepees on the plain, and the missionary with his family and guests to the mission house.