

Making Christmas Special by Rodney Hanson

The last customer at the bar across the street from our store-looking my way waiting for me to start pulling off the lights.

We had been busy all day, all of the help had gone home to their families, and my brother and I were wrapping things up in our hardware store so we could get home ourselves to our families and get ready for the Christmas Eve service.

But now "Sarge," the guy from the bar across the street, was headed our way just like I expected. As he came through the door, he said, "I've got to get a present for my mother. Can you help me out?"

I don't fault "Sarge" for sitting in the beer hall all afternoon. This was his habit since returning from a career in the service. His place away from home. Like so many people, it was his "third" place."

I've read we all have a "third place" the retreat you find besides your home and work, For some, it's a fish house, watching football, hunting, snowmobiling. For others, it's probably the Internet, your church, cards, crafts, Mahnomen, Apache Junction-anything that complements your particular life style.

"Sarge's" third place (like many others) was the beer hall "where everybody knows your name." Besides nursing a few drinks, it was where he could put a dime in the jukebox and listen to "Wabash Cannon Ball" as he dreamed of the life he'd spent away from Vergas.

But the time came, like this Christmas Eve., when it was time to leave his dream world and remember his bringing up. He lived with his widowed mother since his discharge. She was a saint and he knew it, but like many an old soldier, he wasn't comfortable expressing that love.

But he had finally made the move this night. He had come across the street to our store, bought a gift, marched up the block to their home, smelled the lutefisk and lefse as he walked in, handed her the token of his love and affection, and felt good that he had done what he'd spent all afternoon thinking about.

And she was so proud that "her boy" hadn't forgotten. It was Christmas Eve and she had received a gift from her son!

I think of how different the gifts were in those Christmases past. For some years, the kids got the new Monopoly games and Tonka toys that had become popular. Pyrex coffee pots with detachable handles and electric knives came into being for the moms. Norelco shavers came out for dad when electricity became available.

Years previous, I remember how often we sold flashlights as Christmas gifts, so you could find your

way to the barn. One year, I sold a chemical toilet to a customer who thought his wife would be so pleased. She wasn't.

Another year, our big prize for the Christmas drawing by the big tree on Main Street was a water pail with dipper. Practical gifts.

Have you noticed that Christmas expectations change along with your aging? For kids, it's church programs, peanuts, Santa Claus. As you get older, it's caroling, high school events and sweethearts. When you leave home, it's loneliness and longing.

When the wife and kids become a part of your life, you again relive your youth and revel in the grandkids. And then you adjust to the passing of your folks and settle in for memories and establishing your own traditions.

I've found the need for some type of Christmas celebration always persists. I recall an unusual Christmas Eve for me when I was young, in the service, and waiting for shipment overseas from a base in California. We were restricted to the base, so I knew it was going to be different.

We had already attended the evening service at the base chapel and knew we'd be down at the mess hall the next day for a big Christmas dinner.

So there was no hardship. But also no Christmas tree, no snow, no presents, no loved ones. Also there was no TV back then, so we found ourselves settling in for the evening, thinking about home.

There were about a dozen of us who had known each other only a couple of days—barracks buddies tossed together by chance. Somehow, a party developed.

One of the guys said he'd go down to the mess hall and requisition a pan cake. Another brought back two loaves of bread and a two-pound loaf of cheese. From somewhere, some powdered chocolate appeared. I got out my travel iron and we soon had grilled cheese sandwiches and cake, along with hot chocolate.

We sang Christmas carols and talked about our families. Probably not a typical GI party, but we found a camaraderie that was an unexpected gift in itself.

Remembering that party and remembering "Sarge," I'm reminded that Christmas may not always- be the things familiar to us: kids, programs, the manger scene, spruce trees, shopping, loved ones.

But Christmas can always be special and real to you if you just let it be. It's a gift, you know.



Vergas Methodist Church
(About 1940)