

Sharing is one of the best parts of Christmas, so recently Ed Sullivan asked some of his world-famous friends to share their most treasured memories of the season with him. They responded with warm and poignant reminiscences—which Mr. Sullivan, in turn, shares with us.

Christmas with

JACK BENNY



Dear Ed,

When I think of Christmas, I remember Father O'Connell, a priest in Sioux City, Iowa. At his death a few years ago, one of my most treasured friendships suddenly vanished, but a Christmas will never come without my memory racing back over the years to Sioux City and the night we first met.

Christmas in a town where I didn't have one friend wasn't exactly my idea of a holiday. It was in the early 1920s, and I had been playing a vaudeville engagement there. To make things worse, the snow began to fall. It was a white Christmas all right, but I didn't share in any of the joy I saw around me.

On Christmas Eve, the rest of the troupe had started to leave the theater, but I sat in the dressing room, feeling a long, long way from my home and friends in Waukegan. Of course, I had been on vaudeville tours at Christmas time before, but there were always a couple of friends on the bill, and we managed to talk ourselves into a good time and a celebration over Christmas dinner in

some restaurant, even though we were far away from Mama's apple strudel.

But that year, besides not knowing a soul in town, I didn't know anyone playing the engagement with me. As the theater grew silent, I dreaded the prospect of dinner all by myself the next day. I was growing more alone by the minute when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I called, and looked up to see a priest standing in the doorway.

He was a smiling, ruddy-faced man who introduced himself as Father O'Connell. "Jack," he began, adding uncertainly, "I hope you don't mind my calling you Jack." Then at once he explained, "It's just that I've seen you every time you've come to Sioux City, and I think your act is great."

Mind him calling me Jack! We were friends before I had time to answer.

Hesitantly he suggested that in case I hadn't already planned Christmas with someone, he would be very glad if I would have dinner with him. I jumped at the chance.

Instead of a lonely little restaurant the next

afternoon, I found myself at the rectory having a wonderful dinner with Father O'Connell and five other priests. I didn't feel at all strange, though I am Jewish and it was the first time I had been inside a rectory. To this day, I can't remember another Christmas so filled with laughter and real joy. Once dinner was over, the priests went to open presents under their tree, where I was dumbfounded and touched to find a small gift from every one of them for me.

Good will toward all men indeed!

In the years that followed, Father O'Connell and I became close friends. Whenever I played Sioux City, he was at the depot to meet my train and spend any time he could spare with me. I looked forward to bookings in the once-lonely town where I hadn't known a single person on Christmas Eve. With Father O'Connell's sudden death, I lost a generous and dear friend, and I have often realized since then that Christmas away from home is not so very different for me than Christmas away from the warmth and unassuming kindness I had found in that distant rectory in Sioux City.

—Jack Benny



DRAWINGS BY HARRY DEVLIN

J. EDGAR HOOVER



Dear Ed,

I love dogs.

Perhaps that is why the advent of the holiday season always brings to mind one Christmas marked "Special" among all the others. Interlaced through my memory of it is the sharp image of a small black dog.

Old age had overtaken our family's beloved Airedale, Spee Dee. We all missed him very much but my mother most of all. She was convinced that no dog could ever take his place and, out of loyalty to old Spee Dee, no one would suggest getting another dog. But the house seemed empty.

Some months before Christmas, a sympathetic friend, who knew how we all felt about the loss of our old pet, asked a favor of Mother.

Would she, he questioned, look after his dog while he was away on an extended vacation? Mother hesitated. I'm sure she felt that having a dog even as a boarder would bring back the heart-aches and sad memories wrought by Spee Dee's

death. But, at my urging, she agreed reluctantly to accept the responsibility.

It was not long before our household was completely captivated by an alert, black terrier puppy who refused to let anyone think of him as merely a star boarder. We became deeply attached to him.

Yet we could not forget that we didn't own him. Now we not only missed Spee Dee, but we were faced with the prospect of losing Scottie as well. We dreaded the thought that we would soon have to return him.

No one would have admitted how much we wanted to keep the little terrier. To be sure, he was a replacement; we were only doing our friend a favor. We tried to console ourselves by saying no dog could ever take Spee Dee's place.

On Christmas, we found a card among our gifts under the tree. It was addressed to "All the Hoovers" and marked "Not to be opened until Christmas." My mother asked me to open it.

The card read, "Scottie—he's yours to keep."

—J. Edgar Hoover

Ed Sullivan

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BING CROSBY



Dear Ed,

I can look back over a long list of Christmases—not, as Bob Hope would lead people to believe, going back to Valley Forge—but long enough. One Christmas above all others stands out in my memory. It was a simple day, I suppose, by present teen-age standards, but its recollection never fails to induce a mellow glow for me.

I was 13. We lived in Spokane, Wash., where a white Christmas is standard, and where skating and sledding were the big joys for the youngsters in those days. But our skates, which never fit us properly, were hand-me-downs from the elders, and our sleds were handmade affairs with wooden runners and clumsy steering devices.

Now, if a fella had a "Flexible Flyer" with steel hollow-groove runners, footrests, and mechanical steering, he could ask the "village belle" to go up to Ledgerwood Hill and spend the day sledding. My eye was on the girl, and my heart was set on the sled. In the few weeks before Christmas, I worked harder than ever at selling newspapers to earn enough money to buy that sled, but I didn't quite make it. I was a few bucks short, but a few bucks in those days came hard. It was a blue Christmas Eve for me that long-ago night in Spokane.

Under the tree for me on Christmas morning was a shiny "Flexible Flyer" with the red, white, and blue eagle on the center plank. It was a tandem job, too. To me, there wasn't a more beautiful sight in the whole world. I looked at my dad, my eyes filled with gratitude.

"How did you know what I wanted?" I asked. "I have ways," he smiled mysteriously, and as I now know, fathers do. But I was too excited to pursue my questions, and I raced out of the house, dragging my sled behind me.

I think my sled was the only "F.F." standing in front of St. Aloysius Church that morning. I proudly parked it right next to a Maxwell, a

Franklin, a Stevens Duryea, and a couple of Model T's. I confess that my thoughts were not where they should have been during Mass. Afterwards, I stood impatiently at the church door with my dad, as he chatted with the priest. I glanced in the direction of the parking area and saw a group of teen-agers huddled around the spot where I had put my sled. My heart skipped a beat. I had a horrible thought that one of the cars had run over the sled and that my friends were examining the ruins. I flew down the church steps two at a time. When I reached the group, I heard ooh's and aah's. There was my sled, just as bright and shiny as ever, and in one whole beautiful piece. I heaved a sigh of relief, contacted my secret love, invited her to go sledding with me, and then we were on our way.

Hooking the tow rope onto the rear axle of a northbound coal truck, we were at Ledgerwood Hill and careening down its precipitous declines within the hour. It was a clear crisp December day, and I had the cutest girl and surely the slickest sled on the hill. I have never felt so lordly before or since. It was the type of Christmas scene you would expect to see in one of Grandma Moses' paintings.

A big bonfire was blazing on the side of the hill. One of the other kids, Herbie, had filched a dozen potatoes from the family root cellar for roasting in the hot ashes. I traded him two rides on my Double-F for six murphies and, believe me, they tasted even better than *pommes de terre à la maison* at the Tour d'Argent in Paris.

As darkness approached, we spied the coal truck on its way back to town. We flagged it, and again hooked onto that stout rear axle, this time in a long procession of sleds. All the way home we sang, laughed, and pelted one another with snowballs.

I have traveled many different "Roads" in my motion-picture career, but that road up Ledgerwood Hill brings to my mind the sweetest memories of all.

—Bing Crosby

DAVID NIVEN



Dear Ed,

My most memorable contribution to Christmas—if I can call it that—and indeed my only conscious effort in this direction happened on Christmas, 1939.

I had just arrived in England from Hollywood to volunteer for the British Army. Having had some previous military experience, I was commissioned a second lieutenant and given command of a platoon. We were about to be sent to France, and no one was very happy about it. Most of the men had been conscripted from good civilian jobs; this was the "phony-war" period before the big German attack of the following spring, and it all seemed a ridiculous waste of time to most of them. Being commanded by a Hollywood movie star was an additional irritant for them and made the whole thing seem even more ridiculous. The men were not mutinous—but they were certainly 40 of the least well-disposed characters I have ever been associated with, let alone been in command of.

We were not permitted liberty on that Christmas Eve because we were due to leave England and our families the next day—a fine prospect for the holidays. The entire platoon was billeted in the shabby stables of a farm near Dover. Each man gathered up what little straw he could find for use as bedding.

I could sense that everyone disliked me intensely. The air was thick with sarcastic cracks about my motion-picture bravery in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "The Dawn Patrol," and "The Prisoner of Zenda."

It so happens that every night of my life I have knelt down by my bed and said a few simple prayers—I am ashamed to say that, in general, these prayers, if heeded, would aid my personal well-being no end. Nevertheless, they were prayers of a sort—to God.

I was faced with a difficult decision. If I suddenly knelt in prayer, the chances were that 40 tough soldiers would take it as final evidence of Hollywood flamboyance.

On the other hand, I have always felt that prayers said in comfortable and unobtrusive positions don't really count.

Finally I plucked up my courage. I knelt and said my prayers.

As I prayed, the snickering and the laughter slowly died away.

I suppose the exciting end of this story would be that some vast, hulking conscript kicked me over, whereupon I fought valiantly and victoriously for the sake of our Lord.

The true ending was far more satisfactory.

When I finished my prayers and lay down again on the straw, I looked rather sheepishly around the stable and saw at least a dozen soldiers kneeling quietly and praying in their own way.

—David Niven

(Continued)

