I Know…I Was There

Picture-Perfect Holidays

Snow outside at Christmas is great, but what's inside is better.

BY THE TIME you read this, you've most likely picked out the Christmas card you'll be sending to all the friends and family on your mailing list.

And I'll make a wild guess that the cover may show a beautiful snow scene, possibly with a cardinal perched on a pine bough. Or maybe you chose the one with a polar bear mama and her cubs snuggled down in the white stuff.

No? Then it might be the one with a horse-drawn sleigh traveling down a snowy lane toward the big white house with candles in the windows.

Okay, it was just a hunch based on what I've seen in the card shops the last few years. Any of them are fine with me, as long as there's lots of snow in the illustration. Snow for Christmas was essential where I grew up, in northern Illinois. If it was one of those rare Decembers that had been snow-free, the big topic of conversation was, "Do you think we'll have a white Christmas?" Irving Berlin found just the right words to catch the mood of the season: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know."

Yes, complete with "treetops glisten(ing)" and "sleigh bells in the snow."

Indeed, that's what a proper Christmas is all about. As another seasonal song urges, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow."

But then came a Christmas in Houston, Texas. I had hoped for a

2-week furlough so I could be home for the holiday, but a heartless officer said something about there being a war going on. He did, however, give me an overnight pass to town.

So there I was, alone, staring out the window of a room at the USO. A steady rain was falling outside.

Rain? And then, at midnight, those strange Texans began shooting off fireworks. Rain and fireworks on Christmas Eve!

What's wrong with these people?

Regional Weather

That was when I first realized that having snow for your major Christmas "decoration" is not a worldwide joy, not even a nationwide event.

Pick any place south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and it's a good bet that you could spend all the Christmases of a lifetime without seeing snow…except on postcards, or in movies made mostly back in the '30s and '40s. Christmas trees, yes. And presents under the tree. And the traditional carols. But no snow. And no ice skates or Flexible Flyer sleds or skis as presents. Not even a new snow shovel for Dad.

I also learned that it was quite a treat to be with someone who had never experienced snow and watch how they would react.

One such favorite memory was in a December that was snow-free until noon on the 24th. And that's when a picture-perfect snowstorm moved in. Very little wind, but huge snowflakes drifted lazily down until an 8-inch blanket of snow covered everything by the dinner hour.

And then it stopped.

That was the winter that a teenager from Bogotá, Colombia lived

with us as an exchange student. She had never, ever seen snow.

As we walked to our New England-style white church for the midnight service, Mona's eyes were filled with awe…and then tears of happiness.

"It's just so beautiful," she sobbed.

A year or two later, a couple from Buenos Aires arrived for a visit over the holidays. Augustus, also new to snow, stepped out of the automobile. His feet slid out from under him, and he plopped down on the slippery driveway, roaring with laughter.

Then he got up and bounded across our snow-covered front yard, yelling and waving his arms like an 8-year-old boy. (The next day, I taught him how to make snowballs. Big mistake!)

Oh, yes, discovering snow can be a lot of fun. Just watch any young dog that jumps into snow for the first time.

It took me a while to learn that you can have a dandy Christmas without snow. A friend of mine who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama smugly says that a nice Christmas was when you could leave the front door open and enjoy the fresh air while looking forward to enjoying turkey with oyster stuffing already in the oven for supper.

And, as readers in Arizona, Mississippi and Florida are quick to point out, you don't need snow to do a bang-up job of decorating your yard and house, inside and out.

One of our readers recalls how, in 1942, her dad decided to dazzle everyone in the usually snow-free San Francisco area. He started in summer and doggedly stayed at it, creating a sleigh, reindeer, Santa and a dozen other figures out of plywood for a lavish display in his front yard.

Creative Traditions

And, yes, father Joe topped the list of displays to visit that a San Francisco newspaper published. (Apparently, the reporter hadn't stopped by on the night when the animated Santa's thumb got stuck in his nose. But plenty of neighbors got a good laugh out of it.)

Another reader, Jan Allen, wanted to make a special gift for her father, who was in a veterans' hospital. But she was broke. No problem.

Although her part of Georgia lacked snow, there was a plentiful supply of that state's famous red clay around Alma, where she lived.

She molded a clump of it into something she hoped would look like an ashtray and put it on a fence post to dry. Later, she painted it green.

"Dad acted as if it were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen," she remembers.

So, despite what the Christmas cards and songs would have us believe, lots of people have perfectly wonderful Christmases without even a flake of real snow falling.

Our community hospital here in north Florida goes for lavish outdoor decorations.

The hospital has a little lake surrounded with a display using thousands of lights and holds an outdoor concert to kick off the first night's lighting.

A theme park located just south of here boasts its 2 million Christmas lights, although I've never counted them to make sure.

“Mele Kalikimaka” means the same thing in snowless Honolulu as “Merry Christmas” does in blizzard-bound Fargo, North Dakota.

It is the love, not the snow, that’s important.

I know…I was there.

—Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

Clancy’s columns on “life back when” appear in each issue of Reminisce and Reminisce EXTRA.