

# Care for fellow man: a true Christmas story

I was the youngest of seven children. My father grew up in Frostburg in Western Maryland, and worked in the coal mines. In those days young men either stayed working in the mines or moved north to Pittsburgh. My father was the exception, moving east to Baltimore where he got a job as a purser on the Emma Giles, a side wheeler that carried passengers and some cargo from the Baltimore harbor to places on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

When the Great Depression came, people could no longer afford to take excursions. The Emma Giles shut down and my father was out of work. He came home, grabbed the railing on the steps and sobbed. He joined millions of other men desperately seeking work to support their families. He got a job selling radios - a new commodity - door-to-door. Nobody had money to buy a radio so we were very poor.

In the mornings one of the children would take a wagon up to St. Ambrose Church in Park Heights and bring home a bag of flour or such. We ate oatmeal for breakfast, lunch and dinner. If we complained, our Irish mother said we should get down on our knees and thank God we *had* oatmeal to eat. No sympathy there.

My mother had a brother who was a Passionist priest in Union City, N.J., across the Hudson River from New York City. A few days before Christmas a man gave him a \$20 bill and said perhaps he knew a poor family. My uncle sent the \$20 bill to my mother, who said nothing to my father.

Christmas Eve morning, all seven children gathered around the Montgomery Ward catalog and each picked out a toy. I was kind of young, so someone picked out a toy for me. My mother then took the No. 27 trackless trolley down Washington Boulevard to the big Montgomery Ward store at Monroe Street. (The building is still there but has been converted to other uses). For each child she bought a toy and an article of clothing - gloves, cap or the like. She came home and with the money left over - \$20 went a long way in those days - she bought a turkey.

At 5 p.m. Christmas Eve, my father trudged home, knowing he had nothing for his family – for his children – for Christmas. My mother told the children to keep a watch out for their father. She met him at the front door and took him back to the kitchen where she showed him two little presents for each child and a turkey.

That was his Christmas present and that was her Christmas present.

I think of this every Christmas Eve.

The generosity of the man in New York created happiness for a poor family. This time of year we need to think of families who don't have a spare \$20 bill. They are still around.

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