



Christmas 1943

1943 Christmas

Christmas, 1943, was the usual good time with lots of family at our house and then a visit to our grandparents on Mother's side in Willimantic. Dad's parents had died in 1936 and 1937 before we left Rhode Island.

An interesting sidelight. One aunt had a baby without a husband. The baby was one year older than I and she lived all her life with my grandparents. This was all assumed to be the right thing to do - as it was -. No calls to the DCF or the courts were necessary. When my aunt married and had a second daughter, they came as a family unit, and all of it was the most natural thing in the world.

All the other cousins were older by three to 10 years and all were treated alike. We were all friends and there was never any question of one family or the other being different. If you remember, we were the really different family. Except for Uncle Frankie, all married French Catholics. We all went to service or mass on Christmas Eve in our respective churches and then went home. I never once heard any discussion about differences.

The very few times we ever went to a movie were on visits to Memere. But we were not deprived at all. Every Saturday, all of the kids on the road, walked the three miles or so to the Mansfield Training Center. It sat up on a hill in Mansfield and was at one and the same time, impressive and forbidding.

The children, who lived in the school, were not like us; they had mental problems. We weren't sure just what that meant, but they didn't look or act like us and we did not want to be one of them, whatever that was. They all marched in to the first floor of the theater and we were sent to the balcony. Actually, we preferred the balcony and felt favored because we could see a lot more of everything.

We saw cartoons (truly benign by today's standards) and westerns and serials. We had a nickel to spend on the way home at the general store in Mansfield Depot. Actually, that five cents bought a good-sized ice cream cone.

And now for allowances. When I went to high school in 1943, I was given 35 cents a week. A nickel a day to spend. However, if we didn't go to a movie we were to save the Saturday nickel. And the Sunday nickel was for the church offering.

The problem, as I saw it, was that while waiting for the bus after school in Manchester, I could buy a bag of State Line Potato chips. But some of the others had a dime to spend. They were profligate with their treats, offering chips to everyone including me. I, on the other hand, didn't want to share my one bag and so, I used to stand at the end of the group and pretend not to notice the bags being passed around for everyone to share. That didn't last long. The others weren't dumb, after all. So, in the end we all shared whatever chips we had.

And then in school, we bought war bonds. War bonds were to help the army fight the Nazis. They cost \$18.75 and in twenty-five years would be worth \$25.00.

Town of Coventry
1712 Main Street
Coventry, CT 06238
(860) 742-6324
www.coventryct.org





Birthplace of Nathan Hale

Those numbers meant absolutely nothing to us. What mattered was that Mother gave, to each of us, ten cents a week to buy a stamp towards a bond. This money was extra and not taken out of our allowances. It was painless and we felt very patriotic. We were doing our bit.

The day we bought bonds in school was a day for stories about the war effort and of our brave soldiers. Japan was mentioned in passing, something about a Yellow Peril. Our war was with the Germans. Curiously, the Korners were German but, to my knowledge, no one ever treated them any differently than anyone else. Yet, when the Polish people came, they were different because they were Catholic. What an odd sense of values we had.

And so we moved closer and closer to D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Respectfully submitted, Jean Thibault Castagno

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