

A Century of the Magic of Christmas Eve in Santa Clara

Every year as Christmas approached, the children of Santa Clara knew that a special night was coming! For more than 100 years, Santa Clara has held a Christmas program on Christmas Eve, including the nativity enacted by the children of the town. Every year, the children wondered "Who would get to be the wise men (and sing "We Three Kings")? Who would be the angels? The shepherds? And who would be selected to be Mary and Joseph? We practiced our parts for weeks, getting ready for this special night!



As the nativity program came to an end, every child knew that if Santa could, he would visit our little community for a special stop before his busy night of flying all over the world began! In anticipation of his coming, we sang, as loud as we could, "Jingle Bells", "Frosty the Snowman", "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." As we sang, we listened for the jingle bells Santa always wore that signaled his arrival!



The anticipation was breath-taking! We knew that Santa brought a special gift on this occasion; for the girls, it was usually a new doll. For the boys, it might be a special truck, or cap-gun six-shooters or even a BB gun. For little ones, a stuffed animal might be their surprise.



This annual tradition has been a beloved part of our community for over 100 years. Nina Gubler Atkin (1920-2004) wrote about the excitement she felt: "For Christmas, the town had a party of Christmas Eve. A large tree was decorated, and the girls would always get a new doll

on that night. They were fastened to the tree, so as they waited to be called, they wondered which of the dolls was for them!



Kirsten Gubler Stevens, a woman whose father grew up in Santa Clara but moved away when she was small, said "It was the highlight of my life!" She remembered getting a baby doll dressed in striped pajamas when she was 2 or 3 years old. Others have commented that the night was the crowning event of every year! The excitement was palpable!

To prepare for this event, the whole community helped. Sometimes the church organized the event, and in later years one family would be designated as the party's chairmen, and others assigned to help. It was truly a labor of love. The teenage girls helped to gather the toys from parents that were to be given to their children on this special night. A group of women and men directed the program, arranged for costumes, decorated the stage and the Christmas tree, and generally made the whole event work!

The program was held in the auditorium on the second floor of the school until the new chapel was built in 1948. It included a cultural hall and stage so the program was subsequently held there.

Generations of residents of Santa Clara remember the magical memories of their childhood Christmas Eve. One memorable year Ken Ence, the son of Ken and Annaliese Ence, attended the program with his girl-friend, Susan Ashcroft. When Santa called her name at the end of the program to come up to sit on his lap and receive a special gift,



she was shocked! The gift she received was an engagement ring, along with a proposal from Ken.



Every person who experienced Christmas Eve as a child in Santa Clara must have special memories of those nights, of receiving a special gift directly from Santa, and of the thrill of such a momentous event in a young child's life! We who experienced Christmas Eve in Santa Clara still treasure our memories!

- Vickie Frei Laswell remembers that her mother ended up being Santa one year (at the last minute?). She had dressed at Hilda Stucki's home just a few steps from the church, and when she left after finishing her visit, the children followed her, asking where the sleigh and reindeer were.
- LeGrande Hafen shared that when he was very little, his older brother, Darrell and Duane Gubler used to wrap a gift for Hiram Gubler. Their gift was usually a cigar or something similar that Hiram would never use. Santa would call up Hiram and present him with his gift. Hiram was always a good sport about these types of pranks, which were a typical thing to happen in Santa Clara in those years.
- Paul Graf remembered a Christmas when Santa didn't distribute gifts, but instead gave out bags of popcorn and candy. There was one family in town who didn't attend the Christmas Eve program because their resources were very scarce, and they didn't have gifts for Santa to give to their children. The family wouldn't accept gifts donated from the town, so the plan was made to give out popcorn and candy. This apparently wasn't appreciated, and the next year they went back to the usual practice of Santa giving gifts.

