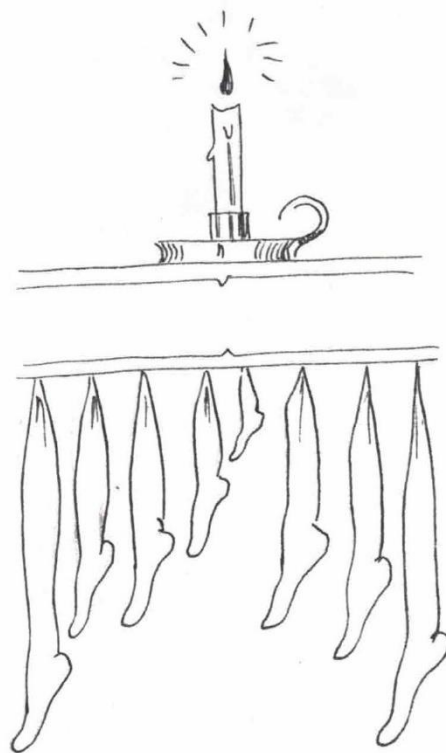


BRHS News December 2019

Researching and preserving our history

From Our Archives



Evelyn's brother or brother-in-law "Lowney" illustrated her 1940 Christmas letter, including this drawing.

Christmas 1904

By Barbara Rumsey and Evelyn Hodgdon

Evelyn Hodgdon

Evelyn Hodgdon, the author of the below letter, was born in 1896 and died in 1974 in Oneonta, New York. She was the granddaughter of George and Angelia (Lewis) Hodgdon of Sawyers Island and the daughter of Frank Hodgdon, who was born on the island in 1867. They lived in the house now owned by Dawn and Bob Kidd.

Evelyn was educated at Columbia University in the 1930s and devoted her life to teaching in all its forms: volunteering in local schools, Sunday schools and churches while earning a living as a professor at the State University of New York at Oneonta. Following her retirement from SUNY-Oneonta in 1959 after a 25-year career there, she jumped right back in, teaching in Buckhorn, Kentucky and Milford Center, New York until her death. There is a center named after her at SUNY-Oneonta in recognition of her lifelong efforts to improve the education of children in rural areas.

Evelyn had a tradition of giving her memories as Christmas presents to nieces and nephews—a prudent course with ten sisters and brothers! Evelyn's 1941 Christmas letter about a summer trip to Sawyers Island was printed in this column in 1992 and published in "Sketches I." We are fortunate to also have her 1940 letter describing a 1904 Christmas. It was provided by Evelyn's nephew, Parker Hodgdon of Vermont.

Barbara Rumsey

Dear Nieces and Nephews,

Christmas Eve is a time when one thinks of all the people he loves and has loved. It is a time when a grown-up remembers other Christmases past. Because of all these things I write this letter to tell you of a Christmas 36 years ago.

The family then consisted of Wilbert, myself, Albert, Edith, George, Percival, Alva, and Clifton. Arleen, Alice, and Helen had not yet been born. We lived with our father, mother, and grandfather. (Of course some of the family are now your father, your mother, or your uncles and aunts.) Wilbert was ten years old. I was going on nine and Clifton was a brand new baby who arrived a little too early to be a real Christmas gift. All the others ranged between and were like steps.

The new baby was expensive and there was not much money left for other things that year. Mrs. Stimson was taking care of Mother and the new baby. I was supposed to look after all the other children.

My father told Wilbert and me that he could spare us just half a dollar for Christmas. Now if you count our family, you will find that there were eleven folks to buy for. After much planning, we, the two oldest, decided that if we did not spend anything for each other, we could buy eight five-cent gifts and a ten-cent one for Mother.

Wilbert fastened a box on the sharpshooter Father had made him. We called boys' sleds sharpshooters in those days. I can see the sled now and feel the thrill of excitement of starting off to shop, warmly dressed, with an awful responsibility of half a dollar in Wilbert's pocket. I can see the sun getting high over the woods on the river side of the farm. Chimney smoke from the wood fires of our neighbors interested us as we excitedly pulled our sled the three miles to the

village. We hurried the process some by sliding down “New Road Hill.” You know there were no automobiles on winter roads at that time.

Shopping for Presents

All day we shopped. I can even remember a few things we bought. Mother’s gift was a dish drainer, a ten-cent wire one that looked just grand to us. For Edith, a red hair ribbon; for George, colored crayons; and for Alva, a tiny doll for me to dress. We bought the baby a rattle. Oranges were not common on our table then. I never expect to see two oranges that look as large and fine as those we bought for Father and Grandfather.

All these things packed securely in our sled, we started home. It grew dark as we trudged back and the way seemed longer. We wished that the hill would tip the other way so we could ride down. The stars and the snow made the twilight bright, and the neighbors’ lamps made the way seem friendly and cozy. Arriving home, we hid our box in the dark clothespress until it should be time to wrap the gifts.

Baby Clifton was to be nine days old on Christmas Day so it was decided that the tree could be in Mother’s room. It had to be a small tree because the rooms you know are low, and before the windows were put into the roof the eaves made the side of the room slope. Father, as usual, went with us to get the tree. He was always eager to get a “six point fir” and often we spent a whole Sunday afternoon searching for the right tree.

Decorating the Tree

Now we had no electric lights at the farm, and candles on a tree were not considered safe, but it must be trimmed. I love to recall those pre-Christmas winter evenings when, after the barn chores were finished, the supper dishes done, and the littlest ones in bed, Father put the big lamp in the center of the dining room table, and we all gathered around it. We painted nuts with gilt paint, cut cardboard stars and bells and covered them with tinfoil. We made cornucopias with strung popcorn and cranberries. Father directed us and stopped mending a harness or tapping shoes to cut us a pattern now and then. As fast as someone finished a piece, it was carried to Mother’s room for approval and put upon the tree.

The last evenings were spent in the kitchen. Father kept the stove filled with split wood till the top glowed red. We took turns shaking the popper till the big milk pails were filled with popcorn. The molasses syrup was cooked till it was brittle in cold water. Father stirred the corn and syrup together and all helped make big platters of corn balls. We made both molasses and vinegar candy. If I remember hard, I can smell that kitchen now. How glad I was to have Father’s help with all the dirty dishes we made.

Christmas Eve

We were ready for Christmas Eve. Father did the chores early. Supper was early and quickly cleared away. We could all sit up late. Everybody was “dressed up” and somewhat hushed. We filed into Mother’s room to “have the tree.” The littlest ones always went first, and we watched their faces to catch the excitement and wonder there. Mother has told me that we had the usual lovely gifts from aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. I do not remember much about “having the tree” or the gifts, but I remember Wilbert, Dad, and I sitting at the dining room table after the house was quiet and sharing with Father section by section the best orange I ever ate.

It was good to undress by the airtight stove, put on warm night clothes and get into bed to cuddle “the next to the baby” and wonder if it were wrong to think of Mother and Clifton as a Christmas Madonna and Child.

This Christmas has always been clear in my mind. Perhaps because I was almost nine, perhaps because I felt so responsible, perhaps it was the new baby, or because Father did some of

the things that Mother usually did. Whatever the reason, its family fellowship is a lovely memory. My wish for you is such Christmases to look back upon when you are grown.

Much love,
Aunt Evelyn

For more articles by Barbara Rumsey check our website
www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past

EVENTS



Come visit us at our Holiday Open House!

This Saturday, December 7, 10 am to 2 pm

*Everyone is invited to join us for a delicious, heartwarming, cozy,
festive event you won't want to miss.*

And don't forget to buy your raffle tickets for the beautiful

Robert Mitchell photograph, the drawing is this Saturday.



*All of us at Boothbay Region Historical Society wish all of you
a warm and wonderful holiday season.*

*And we thank you all for your support
throughout the year.*

[For more information click on Events Calendar.](#)

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