



When Santa Was Poor

By Bob Warren

AFTER A BIG MEAL at a recent family gathering, we were sitting around counting our blessings when the conversation turned to the current economic conditions and dire predictions of leaner times ahead. That brought talk of a possible recession and even – God forbid – another “Great Depression.”

Our granddaughter Shellie asked what life was like during the depression years. I told of hobos going from door to door begging for work to earn a bowl of beans and some cornbread, of kids wearing hand-me-down clothes and of general frugality. Then on a more personal note, I recalled how, by the time I was eight years old, I had worked hard picking cotton and shining shoes in my dad’s barber shop and had banked \$20, almost enough to buy a new bicycle. But I was devastated when both Frisco banks failed at the beginning of the depression, taking all my bicycle

money with them.

Hearing that, our eight-year-old great-granddaughter McKinley dropped her Nintendo and said, “Grandpa, why didn’t you just ask Santa to bring you a bicycle?”

I replied, “Honey, Santa was poor like the rest of us. He couldn’t afford to bring me a bicycle. During the depression, kids were lucky to get even one small toy for Christmas.”

Almost in tears, she said, “If we have another depression, do you think Santa will be so poor I won’t get a bunch of toys?” Rushing to calm her fears, I assured her that everyone is working hard to see that times never get that bad again, but even Santa might have to cut back a little bit.

At that, McKinley’s 12- and 14-year-old brothers, Cooper and Brooks, looked up from their cell phones, stopped texting their friends and asked me to tell them what Christmas was like

when I was a boy.

Always eager to talk about the early days, especially to my grandchildren, I said, “I once wrote an article for *Frisco STYLE Magazine* entitled ‘A 1930’s Christmas in Frisco.’ That article was later published in my book, ‘Frisco-Now and Then.’ Would you like me to read you that story?”

Almost in tears, she said, “If we have another depression, do you think Santa will be so poor I won’t get a bunch of toys?”

Everyone nodded that they were ready and settled back to listen as I began reading:

Christmas in Frisco! What was it like in the ‘old days?’

The year was 1930 – the early days of the Great Depression. Dollars were hard to come by. Parents were forced to cut their spending for non-essentials such as Christmas gifts and decorations.

One of the first things we notice as we approach the 1930s home is the lack of Christmas lights. There were none, either in or around the homes in Frisco, nor was the downtown area decorated. To see Christmas lights, you had to climb into an unheated car, most

likely a Model T Ford, and make a slow, 27-mile drive on a rough gravel road to downtown Dallas. There you gazed wide-eyed into the windows of department stores such as Neiman Marcus, Sanger Brothers and Tiche-Goetinger.

“Bought”

Christmas trees too, were non-existent here. If you had a tree, you probably cut it yourself in some Denton County pasture.

Our family’s “tree” was a small limb cut from a cedar tree. The limb was stuck in a well-decorated gallon syrup bucket filled with wet sand.

Once when I was about six years old, my tip-of-the-toe gift was a “dollar” watch – an Ingersoll which actually cost one dollar and came with a one-year warranty.

Brooks asked what we used to decorate the tree. I told him we made our own ornaments, some cut from colored paper. We popped popcorn, strung the popped kernels on thread and draped the rope on the tree. There were also paper chains. Making paper chains in school was an annual event. Tablet paper was colored with crayons, cut into strips and the ends were pasted together to form a colorful chain.

Christmas shopping was quite different in the “old days.” Since there were no toy stores in Frisco, most of our gifts were ordered from the Sears-Roebuck catalogue, fondly known as the “wish book.” Weeks before Christmas, children poured

over the catalogue, making optimistically long wish lists for their letters to Santa.

Our letters were addressed to Santa at the North Pole, but to be sure he got the word, some were chosen to be published in the local

paper, the “Frisco Journal.” I remember one year my letter showed up in the newspaper, further strengthening my faith that Santa was a loyal subscriber to the “Journal.”

As we peer into the 1930s home on Christmas morning, something else is noticeably different from today. There are no huge piles of colorfully wrapped presents. Yes, there were gifts, but not nearly as many as now. Santa had a way of shortening our lists, usually to one main present per child and he never wrapped his gifts. My only wrapped gifts came from an aunt or uncle in Arkansas.

Boys, if they were good, got things like a cap pistol, a pocket knife or a BB gun from Santa.

At that point, my wife, Wanda, said most of her girl friends got a doll, or perhaps a buggy for last year’s doll. She remembers once getting a home-made doll. It seems Santa was so poor that year that he asked Wanda’s mother to make the doll. But the next year she got a “store-bought” baby doll which she treasured for years.

Wanda continued, “One year, before Christmas, I was snooping through some dresser drawers and found a doll hidden

away. It had to be a present from my parents since Santa always saved his gifts for Christmas morning. I sneaked a peek most every day, never telling anyone and acted very surprised on Christmas. Oh, by the way, Santa brought some doll clothes which were a perfect fit for my new dolly!”

McKinley asked, “Grandpa, what did you get?” I told her I always hung my stocking, the longer the better, for Santa to fill. He usually filled it with an apple, an orange, some assorted nuts (all rare treats), some candy and perhaps fireworks, such as sparklers or a Roman Candle. Sometimes Santa sneaked a surprise into the tip of the stocking’s toe. Once when I was about six years old, my tip-of-the-toe gift was a “dollar” watch – an Ingersoll which actually cost one dollar and came with a one-year warranty.

I was so proud of my watch that I volunteered the time of day to everyone I saw. You can imagine my disappointment the following Christmas day when my Ingersoll quit, never to run again. How’s that for timing a warranty?

Cooper spoke up, “But Grandpa, why didn’t you just get a new battery for your watch?”

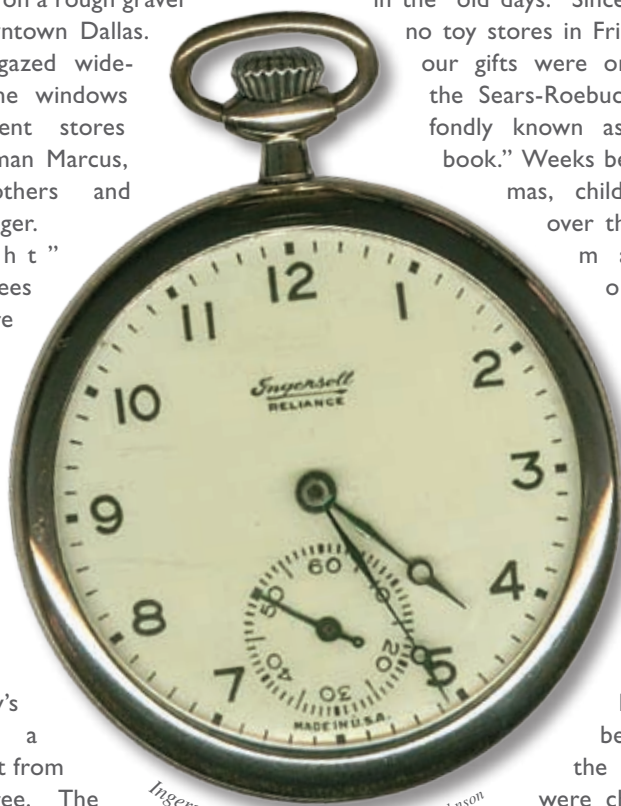
I replied, “It wasn’t that simple. The watch was spring-driven and had to be wound every day. Battery-operated watches didn’t come along for several years.”

Brooks summed up the kids’ feelings with, “It sounds like Christmases weren’t much fun back then.”

But I replied, “To the contrary. We had lots of fun playing with our toys. After all, everyone was ‘in the same boat,’ so we were happy with what we got.

And kids, that’s just the way Frisco Christmases were in the 1930s.”

Bob Warren is a Frisco native, former mayor and frequent contributor to Frisco STYLE Magazine. Bob Warren’s book *Now & Then* is available from the Heritage Association of Frisco at www.friscoheritage.org



Ingersoll dollar watch photo by Chris Johnson