

*Joe Cukaj's
Holiday Giveaway 2019*



*The
Christmas Short Story
Collection*

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Introduction

While most people know me for my outdoor recreation books, my real passion is writing short stories, in particular, humorous short stories about growing up that we can all relate to, all loosely based on faulty memories, and that's where my writing career began.

My love for writing short stories was fostered by listening to my radio and writing idol, Jean Shepherd. When I was growing up in northern New Jersey in the 60s and early 70s, my radio dial was always tuned to WOR radio out of New York City and in particular to Jean's radio show where he would tell the funniest tales about everyday life and growing up. If you're not familiar with Jean, you will remember his most popular work, the movie, *A Christmas Story* that was culled from his book, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*.

After four years in the U.S. Navy, I began my own radio career, started writing and submitting stories to magazines, and began telling them on my own late night radio show on WUNI and WMML radio in Mobile, Alabama.

Well, since that time, I have branched out to my outdoor recreation guides, travel web content, and historical books, but the short stories keep on coming.

This holiday season, I wanted to share with you three of those stories that deal with winter and the Christmas holiday. The first two were written for my radio shows on WMML and WBCA radio in Bay Minette. They were pre-recorded and aired on Christmas day in 1985 and 1991, respectively but have since appeared in magazines and one produced for my podcast, *Joe Cuhaj's Shorts*.

The first story is called, *Snowy Days and Mondays*, a tale of a rare snow emergency and school closing that resulted in an incredible (and almost deadly) sledding challenge. The second, *A Different Christmas Story*, tells of the angst a kid felt (that would be me) as he desperately wanted a new bicycle for Christmas and his final realization – the truth (only sort of) about Santa.

The final story came from my podcast, *Joe Cuhaj's Shorts*. It's called *A Wish Book Christmas*. Do you remember the Sear's Wish Book? It was one of those iconic Christmas treasures that we all waited for as kids so we could start building our list for Santa. And brother, what things they had in that book!

I hope you enjoy this holiday offering and it brings a smile, laughs, and good memories to you. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, everyone.

BONUS!!!

As a bonus this year, you can get your own MP3 audio copy of these holiday classics. Well, they've been around a while so they are classics, in that sense. :)

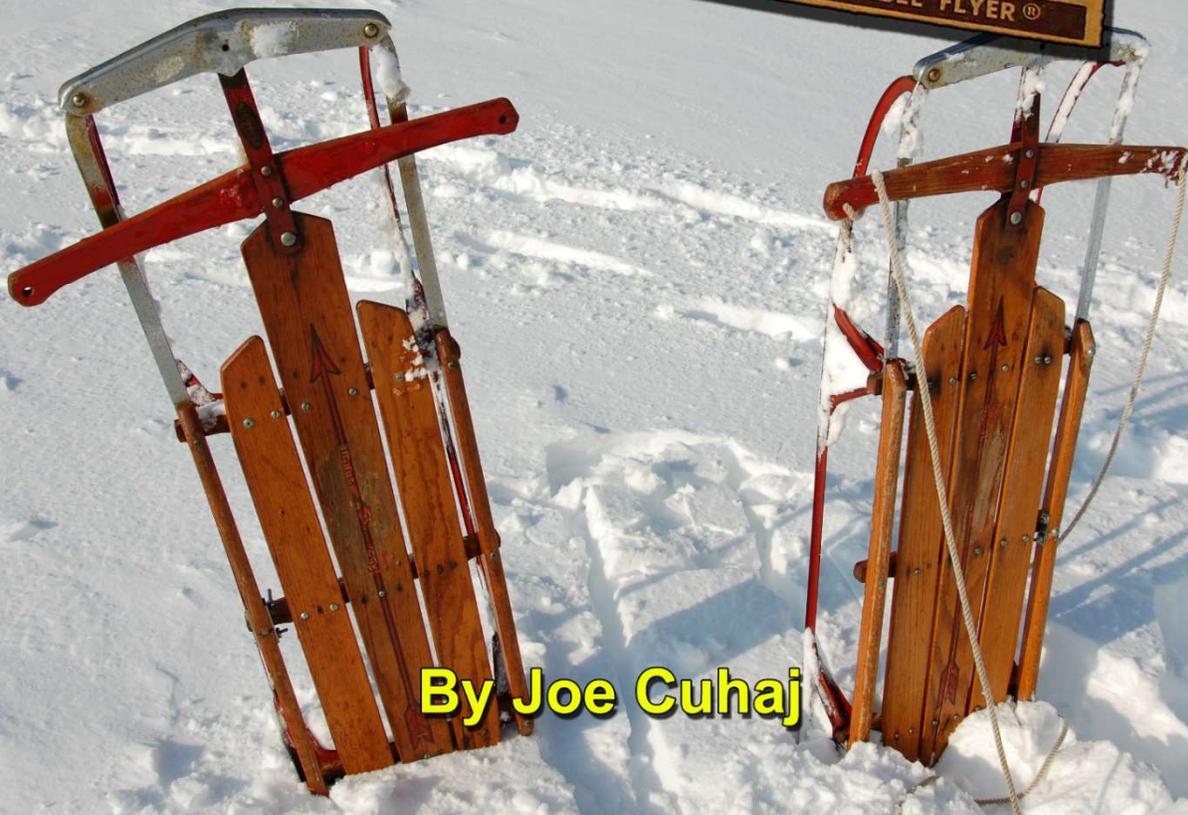
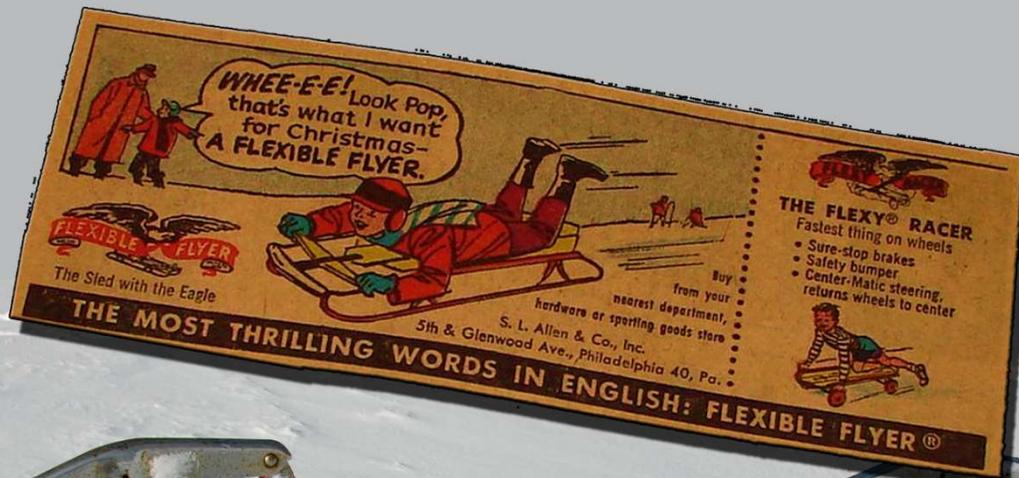
- Snowy Days and Mondays – Radio Version
- Snowy Days and Mondays – Podcast Version
- A Different Christmas Story – Radio Version
- A Wish Book Christmas – Podcast Version

Simply visit my Holiday Giveaway 2019 page online and download your copies to listen to anywhere!

<http://www.joe-cuhaj.com/holidaygiveaway2019.html>

Snowy Days and Mondays

A Wintery Short Story



By Joe Cuhaj



Flexible Flyer Days Are Here!

Crisp, bracing, tingling days that stir the red blood in your veins—when all outdoors beckon and the snow-covered hills invite you and your Flexible Flyer.

Any boy can tell you that Flexible Flyer is the strongest, speediest sled. Its hollow-grooved, non-skid, steel runners glide straight and true as a sharp skate, without side-slipping or slowing up. Steering gear responds like a flash, making high speed in "traffic" safe. Outlasts 3 ordinary sleds. Ask your dealer for a cardboard model or write us for it.

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Flexible Flyer

The Original Steering Sled

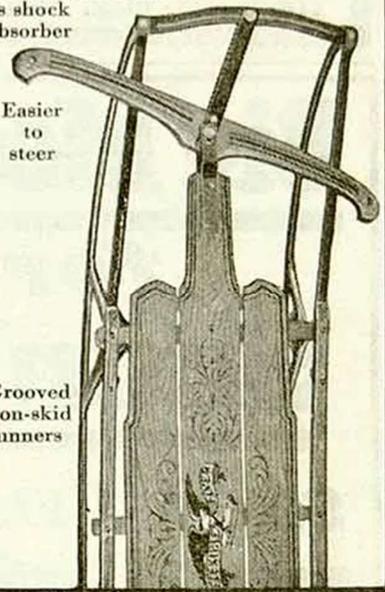


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steer

Grooved
non-skid
runners



Snowy Days and Mondays

When you start getting older, and by older I mean over 18, the seasons begin to lose their magic. No longer do they hold a special place in our hearts. One season morphs into another as we drift through life trying to make it through the best way we can. It gets to the point where we dread them - winter means more snow to shovel; spring keeps us cooped up in the house all day because of the rain; it's too hot to do anything in the summer; we fight an onslaught of leaves in the fall.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

We tend to lose sight of what each change of season means and sadly become curmudgeonly about them as the magic wanes until we become grumpy old season haters.

But when you're a kid every season has its own special magic - spring is a rebirth, a chance to start fresh; summer is endless days of frolicking and mischief; fall is crisp and cool, adorned in beautiful magnificence; and winter, well winter is extra special. Of course there are those festive holidays that occur in those dark biting months, but the season on its own has its own special magic.

If there is one season that I cling to as the sands of time march on its winter. I relish in its breathtaking majesty. Most people, however, are not like me and look at it quite differently. They see winter as that bone chilling, finger numbing time of year when the wind blows through you, when each breath is harsh and biting, and the thrill of stepping out onto an icy, un-salted sidewalk sends shivers down the spine of even the most diehard stuntman.

I feel sorry for those who have lost the feelings that comes from experiencing the virginal pureness of the first snowfall of the season. Light, cottony flakes falling endlessly from the sky, the world is so silent, so tranquil, so still. As one tiny flake falls after another it's almost inconceivable that in less than an hour a good thick blanket of white will cover the ground. The silence from this wintery insulation is only disrupted by the occasional grinding of large snow plows scraping the roads.

Growing up in the northeast, I had my share of glorious winters and yes, they were as beautiful as described but unfortunately short-lived. Despite all of the *White Christmas* imagery many conjure up of a good northeastern winter complete with a perpetual snow falling from the sky, fluffy cottony white snow banks lining every path, and icicles dangling precariously from rafters of houses reflecting the light from banks of streetlights making them into their own un-powered but dazzling Christmas light display, there is one sad truth. Just as quickly as these images come they are gone. In the blink of an eye the vestiges of this Norman Rockwell-esque scene vanishes as, inevitably, the snow begins to melt turning it into a nasty grey icy slush. Slush might be great from a 7-11 store but on the ground, that's another story. Towns turn gray and dingy from the combination of melted, sooty snow and the sand and salt the road department uses to keep the roads clear. To this day the scene makes me feel as gritty as a sandwich eaten at the beach.

And it must be noted that while the snow is beautiful, it could also be deadly for the countless number of school kids in the region. In the pre-dawn hours of a school day, while the streets are still dark and the snow is falling silently outside, their excitement begins to grow as they anticipate the possibility of being granted a rare snow day.

A snow day is a built-in holiday for schools in the event of a cataclysmic snowstorm, and it had to be just that to close them down. There could be 20-feet of snow with 50-foot tall drifts covering houses and winds howling at gale force but the schools would remain open. Scott of the Antarctic had nothing on the kids of the region as we munched through our own frozen tundra for a date with Alexander Graham Bell and “new math”.

I remember clearly one such morning from my long distant past. The feeling was palpable. My Spidey-Sense was tingling. I just had “that feeling” - school would be cancelled. I knew it without even setting a single foot out the front door. And it was just that, only a feeling. There was always that slim chance that my intuition was wrong but on this one morning, I was certain of it. This would be one of those days and school would be closed.

I rushed downstairs to the kitchen where my Mom had already tuned our behemoth of a Bakelite transistor radio, the Zenith Royal 3000 Transoceanic, to a local radio station where in just a few minutes an announcer would start reading the list of school closings. The sound from its wide oval cloth covered speaker crackled every time the furnace blower motor kicked on making it almost impossible to hear anything. What I could hear was a barrage of commercials with catchy jingles for *Schaeffer Beer* (the one beer to have when you’re having more than one and my old man’s brew of choice) sung by Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong, *General Tires* who guaranteed that “you’d go in snow or they’d pay the tow”, and *Castro Convertible* sleeper sofas that were so easy to open “even a child could do it”.

I woofed down a bowl of lukewarm *Cream of Wheat* as the clock ticked on, inching ever closer to the time when all of us kids would have to face reality and would be flung headlong into the elements to trudge off to school like Roald Edmundson heading to the South Pole.

I stared at the radio trying to will the announcer to start making the announcements. I imagined that thousands of kids just like me all across the region were doing the same thing. Collectively, we could pool our mental powers together and make this happen.

Tick-tick-tick.

The clock echoed through the kitchen. Still no announcements, only an upbeat tune for a local hardware chain – “Rickels helps you do it better. Do it better with Rickels!”

I held my hand against my chest to check on my heart. It was racing a million beats per minute. I was going to have a heart attack soon if the announcer didn’t get his act together and start reading the list of school closings. How many of us kids would die a slow, painful death this morning as we nervously, frantically, hysterically, waited next to the radio.

Finally, with only minutes to spare, the announcer came on and began reading from his list. I had to leave the cozy confines of my home by 7:30 to begin my epic quest against the elements to get to school. Would ours be one of the fortunate ones to be closed?

The announcer rustled his papers unintentionally making them sound like a crackling fire. He began in a low, bass filled, monotone voice. That was a good sign. The list was probably long and he was saving his voice. As always the Catholic schools topped the reading.

“The following schools will be closed today: St. Mary’s, St. Paul’s...”

To this day no one knows exactly how many Catholic schools there were in the New York City - Tri-State Area, but there were many.

“St. Lucas, St. Bernard...”

Apparently Catholics had inside information that we in the public sector were not privy to. The announcer droned on and on. “St. Patrick, St. Pius, St. Manuel...”

The clock ticked on as the announcer’s monotonous voice continued.

“...St. Cloud, St. George...”

It was now 7:25. I inched closer and closer to the door, slowly pulling one thick heavy rubber snow boot on at a time.

“St. Pius the Ninety Eighth, St. Pius the Ninety Ninth, St. Saint...”

It was now 7:29. The adrenalin was coursing through my veins as I waited for the inevitable let down. No! I must hold out hope that school would be closed today! My palms were sweaty, my heart raced. Come on, man! Say the magic words!

I slipped on my heavy wool coat, wrapped a scarf tightly around my neck, and pulled my Soviet Ushanka style hat down low over my ears. My hand trembled as it latched onto the doorknob when the announcer paused for what seemed like an eternity. The clock struck 7:30. I opened the door. A howling wind whipped through the kitchen bringing a dusting of snow in, scattering my old man’s copy of the *Daily News* about the room. Then, the voice crackled over the air.

“Brookside Elementary...”

You could literally hear the thud of hundreds of kids up and down the street hitting the floor as they passed out from the sheer exhaustion and fatigue brought on by waiting for that one announcement.

Now once our schedule was clear for the day, it was time to go out and frolic in the newly fallen snow, which seems a bit ludicrous. You can’t go to school because of the snow but you can certainly spend the day playing in it, but one should not question these mysteries of life.

In kid-dom there is a special code. It is an unwritten set of rules that one must abide by when granted a reprieve from the local school commissioner. The most important was rule number one: rush outside and have a taste of the newly fluffy white stuff before you begin your day, but you have to be quick about it. There is a very narrow window of opportunity because in less than three hours, the brilliant whiteness is glazed over with a grey tint from car exhaust.

Little did we realize, however, that this was not your typical snow day. No sir. This was more than that. It was the worst ice storm the region had seen in thirty years. The entire town was blanketed with at least a half inch of ice. Power lines above the roads creaked and moaned under the weight of its protective ice sheathing threatening to cut power to the masses at any

moment. Small trees were bending over so much from the weight of the ice that their upper most branches were touching the ground creating artificial ice caves.

Through the frosted windows of our house I could hear car tires spinning relentlessly trying to get a grip on the icy surface until there was that brief moment of silence where you knew what was coming next – the loud thud of the car sliding into a tree or the neighbor’s car that was parked on the street.

The town was completely at a standstill, frozen solid from its overnight blanketing. Nothing could move - buses, trains, even the post office was frozen stiff. Everything was locked in place from the hard freeze with the exception of the intrepid kids of Brookside Elementary who were presented with a rare opportunity to make history – a chance to break the world land speed record for sledding. Well, maybe not the *real* world record, but our own world.

Kids from all over town rushed door to door spreading the word – grab your sleds and head to Houvenkopf Mountain. Today is the day!

Houvenkopf Mountain was small in size as mountains go. This wasn’t your K2 or Everest. It was a small foothill to a larger range of mountains called the Ramapo’s but still, it was a mountain and to us, majestic. The mountain itself was located on the outskirts of town. It wasn’t too big or too small. It was just right for record breaking. The scuttlebutt among us kids was that at one time in the past the town submitted a bid to the Olympic Organizing Committee to bring the Winter Olympics to town. Alas, our one lone mountain did not impress the committee

The kids came in droves carrying with them every imaginable type of snow cruiser. My entire gang of friends were there including Creep with his plastic snow saucer. He earned the name “Creep”, not because he was creepy but because our gang had anglicized his last name - Krepinski.

My buddy Badger lugged with him an old cardboard box that had once housed a refrigerator. And me? I had my Flexible Flyer. If anyone could break the record it would be me and Old Flex.

The sled was an American Flyer model built by the Flexible Flyer Company in Canada. It was made of the finest Northern hardwoods and had multiple ribs that created the deck you laid upon as you sped down the slopes. It had reinforced knee areas for comfort, and the coup de grace, a special powder-coated set of runners that, as the ad in *Boy’s Life* magazine said, “sliced through even the smallest amount of snow”.

The line of thrill seekers began making their way up the hill. The ice made it a long and arduous trek. We would take one step up and slide back three because of the thick icy ground cover. Our friend Denise joined the parade but she was obviously concerned.

“Don’t you think this is a bit dangerous, Joe?” she asked.

“Nonsense,” I shot back. “Flex and I are certified ridge runners! We’re thrill-seekers!”

“You’re idiots,” she mumbled under her breath.

The course we were to tackle was a wide cleared stretch of land called a power line where, coincidentally enough, an electric power line stretched down the hillside feeding the

village with electricity. This power line went up the side of the mountain from the very bottom to the very top.

We climbed and climbed and climbed until we finally reached the top and the upper most end of that power line. We were at least 700 feet up. In the distance on this grey and overcast day we could see my house and the road that ran in front of it. We could see the town with dark black smoke billowing from all of the oil furnaces looking like a little snow and ice covered hamlet in the Swiss Alps. And we could see the bottom of the power line far below, our finish line.

Creep was the first to go on his plastic saucer. The saucer was a concave disc that looked like a giant contact lens with two handles, one on each side that you would hang onto for dear life. There was no controlling this thing. Once you left the chute, you were at the mercy of nature and gravity.

He deftly placed the disc on the ground and grabbed its sides with both hands. Placing one foot securely behind him, the other firmly on the disc, he pushed himself off with the anchor foot. The saucer immediately flew out from under him, careening down the slope sans passenger while Creep up-ended and landed with a thud on his back.

Next up was Badger. The growing crowd began to murmur like armchair quarterbacks sizing up his chances and hypothesizing on the best strategy to use.

“Straight down the chute. Best way,” one voice said.

“Keep the weight back,” another chimed in.

Badger seemed oblivious to the commentary going on behind him as he latched onto the sides of his cardboard box with both hands and flung himself onto the flimsy bobsled propelling himself down the hill.

A polite golf-crowd-like applause came from the spectators as he departed the starting gate. Down the hill he went, his speed increasing exponentially. Trees whizzed past his face but the friction from the high speed was causing the ice to melt beneath the box. It saturated the cardboard rig and upon hitting the first mogul, it ripped in half, sailing Badger off the course and into a frosty snow bank. He had only made it about 200 feet down the hill.

Paramedics, that would be Denise with a thermos full of hot Dr. Pepper, rushed over to the scene, but Badger was fine. He jumped to his feet giving a hefty two-thumbs-up to the ever-growing crowd signaling that he was ok.

It was now my turn. The crowd turned away afraid to watch what they thought would be the end of good old Joe. But I had a different feeling – I was going to make history.

I don't remember the sound of the crowd. I was focused on the run. Creep later recalled that a crescendo of rhythmic chanting began: “Joe! – Joe! – Joe!”

I tucked the towrope of the Flexible Flyer neatly onto the pilot's deck so it wouldn't tangle under the runners. Slowly I leaned over and grabbed each side of the deck. Like a world-class bobsledder I rocked the sled forward and backward in the starting area, concentrating on my goal – the bottom of this 700-foot run.

I pushed it forward – once. I pushed it forward – twice. Then on the third thrust forward I ran with all my might and hopped onto Flex’s deck. I quickly grabbed onto the control horn with both hands and down I went.

The exact speeds that I reached are still debated to this day but to me it felt like I was on the verge of blacking out. The sound of the trees whizzing past my head was one constant rush of air. My heart was racing. My eyes were watering from the sting of the icy cold winter air pelting them relentlessly. I managed to squint through the tears just enough to see that I was already nearing the end marker – a huge oak tree at the bottom of the hill.

With the dexterity of an astronaut with 30 g’s pounding their body during liftoff, I managed to turn the sled just enough to miss the tree and come to the end of the run. There was only one problem – the run wasn’t over. This wasn’t just a snow run we were doing. This was an ice-storm run! My speed continued to increase as I continued down a second smaller hill.

I was going much too fast to just jump off, that would be insane, suicidal. Quickly thinking I lowered my feet that were dangling from the back of the sled so that I could use my toes as a break, but the speed and friction ripped my boots off.

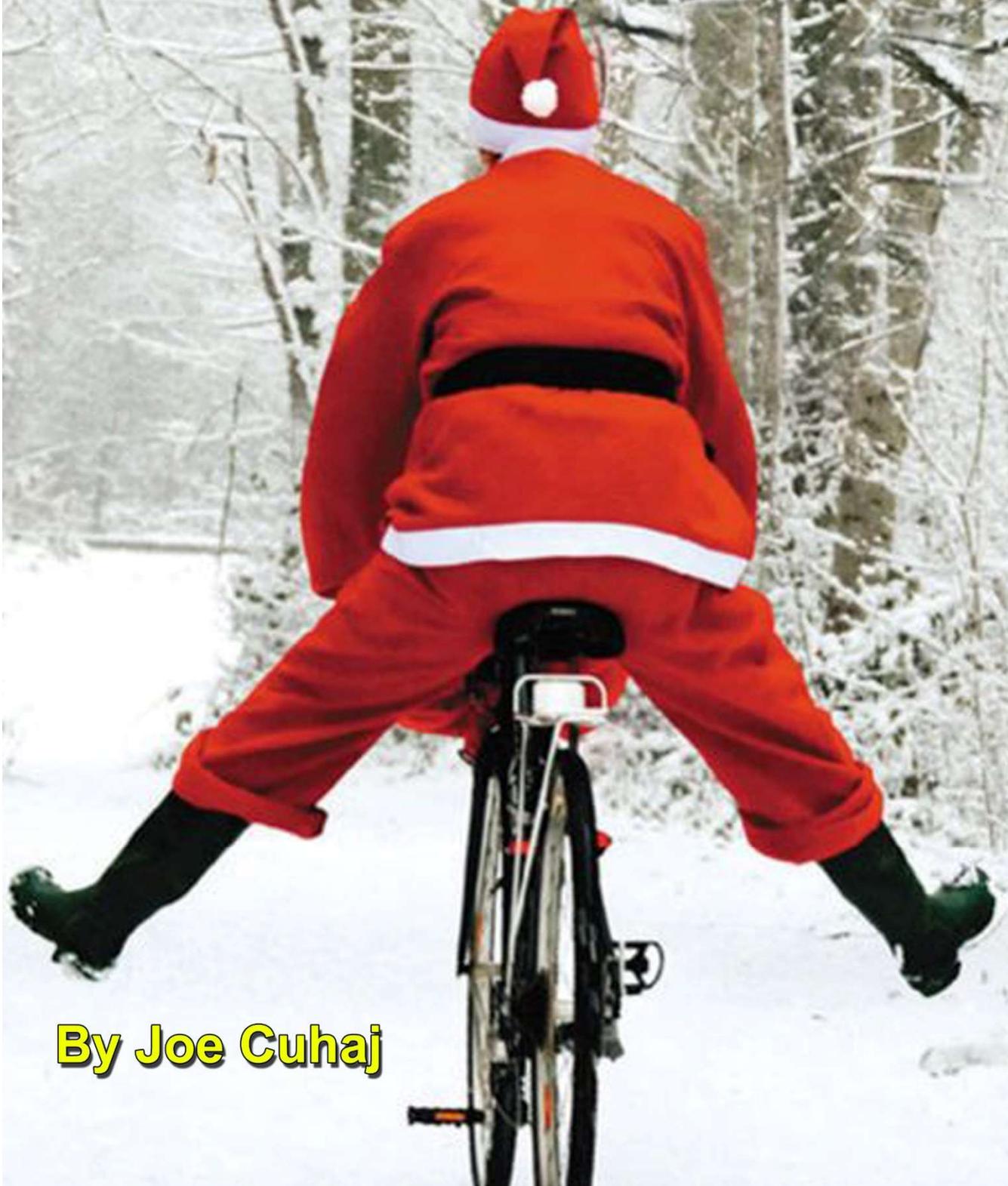
Flex and I continued to careen down the hill and a certain date with our maker. I hit a large bump that almost knocked the wind out of me. I squinted again trying to determine where I was and realized that I was now traveling down Main Street and was heading toward my house.

Parked cars along the side of the road looked like a streak of color past my face. Then I noticed that a sand truck had just entered the road before me and was throwing a plume of sand onto the road to melt the ice. This was my last best hope.

I closed my eyes as Flex and I hit a patch of the sand that had just been thrown from the truck. Flex hit the sand and came to an immediate and sudden halt. I, on the other hand, sailed through the air and crash-landed into a row of garbage cans.

It was an amazing ride, one that would go down in the folklore of this sleepy little village. Generations would talk about how Joe defied all odds and survived to claim the speed title of Houvenkopf Mountain. Personally, I had plenty of time to think back on the event. The ride lasted an unbelievably short ten minutes, the resulting hospital stay an incredibly long seven days.

A Different Christmas Story



By Joe Cuhaj

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A Different Christmas Story

The Sixties were a crossroad in our history. It was a time when the men and women of the "Greatest Generation" ran headlong into a formidable foe and one it hadn't counted on - their own kids. While the Vietnam War raged on many of those in the older generation believed we were in it for the long haul and needed to stay to finish the job so we could stop Communism dead in its tracks. Many of their offspring, however, had a different feeling and questioned our reason for being there in the first place.

Not all kids in the Sixties felt that way. There were those that were caught in the middle, a love of country and a respect for what our soldiers were doing but with a caveat - that nagging question burning in the back of their minds, was it really worth it?

And that's where my sister Joyce and I fell on the spectrum. We were raised to look up to our military with awe and reverence. They were truly making the ultimate sacrifice. Actually, my folks never had to tell me this. I knew it. It was in our genes. We were a Navy family through and through. My dad fought in the Pacific during World War II. We watched the Army / Navy football game religiously on television every fall despite the fact that we all disliked football. And don't you dare change the channel on the TV when a war movie was on. Your hand would be summarily chopped off by my Dad who watched those old black-and-white flicks constantly eyeing every second of stock footage to see if his destroyer was in there.

Then there was my sister. After graduating high school she decided that she wanted to join the Navy and become a WAVE. Before I knew it, she was waving us goodbye as she headed off to boot camp. Every now and then she'd write to us and brag about how she was going to leave that God forsaken state of New Jersey and ship out for exotic ports of call all across the globe once she graduated basic training.

So it was quite ironic that instead of seeing the world she was afforded the opportunity to visit exotic south Jersey, namely the Lakehurst Naval Air Station. The base was just close enough so she could come home during her time off and complain about the sailors and being stuck in New Jersey.

My old man hated it as well but for a different reason. It was close enough that my mom would talk - nay, badger - him into leaving the comfort and safety of our little neighborhood and make the trip down there as many times as possible to pay a visit. It wasn't that he didn't want to visit my sister, he just didn't want to make the trip.

It was about a two to three hour trip to Lakehurst from our house depending on traffic. Even though it was a short haul my Dad hated the drive. Correction - he loathed it and did everything in his power to get out of it, but to no avail. At least once a month we would saddle up the old powder blue Bel Air station wagon and speed off into an early morning dawn down the New Jersey Turnpike heading to Lakehurst.

The one saving grace for my old man was that he fancied himself a racecar driver. If anything, he took the trip as a challenge. He dreamt of breaking the speed record for the shortest road trip on record to Lakehurst, even if it was just his own record.

Without fail we would leave at 3:30 in the morning on the nose. Don't you dare make him late! With a good wind behind our back we would arrive at our destination at 5:30, stay an hour for casual banter and a breakfast of English muffins while my Dad paced the floor and glanced at his watch every 30 seconds. When the clock struck 6:30, VOOM! We would pile back into the station wagon and spin rubber as we headed for home. His personal best time for a complete round trip was 4.5-hours. That was a tough trip. There wasn't even enough time for a bathroom break or much of a conversation, for that matter.

There were, however, occasions when we would spend a full day in Lakehurst. It was usually when the base hosted one of their magnificent air shows that featured the latest Navy fighter planes scorching the sky, the fabulous Blue Angels flying team, and helicopters performing rescue demonstrations.

The sights and sounds of the aircraft made all the kids, young and old, ooh and aah as they performed death defying aerial maneuvers overhead. In between demonstrations I would have just enough time to roam around a bit on my own and explore. Inevitably I would find myself near the hangars that dotted the airfield.

What an amazing place. The hangars were huge and towered ominously over the sandy Jersey shore skyline of pines and scrub oak. This was history and even at my young age it was palpable. These hangars used to house gigantic passenger carrying air ships - dirigibles - back in the 1930s. Looking into the cavernous structures you could imagine the arrival of those monstrous blimps as they lazily circled the deep blue Jersey sky making their way to giant mooring masts for docking.

And of course, there was that most famous of dirigibles, the one that made Lakehurst an entry in all of our history books when it met its doom right here on these asphalt runways - the Hindenburg. Oh the humanity indeed. Until one stands next to one of these mammoth hangars you will never know the enormity of the doomed lighter-than-air craft.

On several occasions I slipped behind the hangars into some woods on the outskirts of the base and there, to my surprise, I found chunks of black rubber. Examining them closely a thought came to me. Nah, couldn't be. Could it? It must be! Pieces of the Hindenburg!

I brought several pieces of the aging, rotting, smelly rubber home to show the gang. I proudly pointed out the incredible history that sat before us. It wasn't until years later that I realized that they were merely pieces of old airplane tires. The old adage is true: some stories are best left untold.

It was a cool spring morning when we embarked on another one of our trips to south Jersey and a visit with my sister. Mom and Dad slid into their respective pilot and co-pilot seats.

"It's zero-five-thirty on the nose," Dad said looking at his watch.

My Mom just sat there quietly staring out the window oblivious to what my dad had said. He shot her a glance and cleared his voice loudly startling my mom.

“Oh,” she said a bit flustered. She glanced down at her watch. “It’s 5:35.”

Another ritual for these trips was for the pair to synchronize their watches so that the official time it took to make the trip could be measured to the nano-second.

“No,” Dad said looking again at his watch. “It’s five…”

He paused for a moment and without saying another word started the car and we backed out of the driveway. Mom was right again.

The usual deafening silence of the long trip through the New Jersey Pine Barrens was disrupted by an occasional, “can’t believe we’re late!” from my Dad. As usual I was lying on my back in the flight deck of this behemoth of a vehicle, the morning sun flickering through the trees as it began rising over the horizon making me wince with each brilliant flash even with my eyes closed.

Mom derailed my dad’s latest tirade about our lateness as she turned around and in her raspy cigarette laden voice asked, “Your birthday is only three weeks away, Joe. What do you want for a present?”

To say I hadn’t already given it a great deal of thought would be an outright lie. I had been thinking about this for weeks, nay months. I had a ratty old bicycle and that was putting it mildly. I popped my head up from behind the rear seat and spoke right up.

“I need a new bike!” I shouted.

I saw my old man glare at me through the rearview mirror.

“Da-hell? You got a bike!” he shouted. “What do you need a new bike for?”

I tensed as he paused for a moment knowing full well what I was in for - the obligatory parental “down-play”.

“I suppose you want one of those bikes with the pansy bars?” he asked

“No, Dad,” I said. “Those are called sissy bars.”

“Oh, and a banana split seat?”

“That’s a banana seat!”

“I bet you want one of those Bang Ray bikes.”

“It’s not a Bang Ray,” I said exasperated. “It’s called a Stingray.”

I realized at that moment just how un-hip and un-cool my parents were. They didn’t understand the terminology and were always way behind the times. I also realized where this was going.

“NO!” I shouted cutting off the discussion. “Do not get me a Stingray bike! I DON’T want a Stingray!”

I had to emphasize this point a few times to drive it home. We have all experienced this scenario as kids: Our parents, while they mean well, never really hear what a kid says. They only get a piece of it then go off on their merry way with only half the data lodged in their brain and then pick out what they *thought* the kid had asked for based on that little crumb of information.

A prime example of this happened only a few months earlier. There was another fantastic toy of the day brought to you by the fine people at *Whamo*. It was called the *Super Ball*.

The Super Ball was a rock hard piece of compressed rubber. Embedded within the dark covering was a marble size ball of steel. This thing was so hard that if you dropped it, not throw it, mind you, but just dropped it, it would bounce 200-feet into the air while cracking the cement in the sidewalk. Getting hit in the forehead with one of these was akin to being shot with a musket ball. So help me I've seen Super Balls take out brick walls.

Everybody had to have one and so did I. One day I asked my mom if she would buy me one when she went to the store not expecting to actually get one. She came home with a *Souper Ball*. Da-hell?

A Souper Ball was a round, gelatinous ball that when you slung it against a wall it would splatter a bit, cling to the wall, and then ooze to the ground. It was cool, but it wasn't a Super Ball.

And so it was that I felt the need to stress the point one more time. I knew they would only run with that part of the conversation about a "Bang Ray" bike and go looking for one and even though they didn't exist, they'd probably find one anyway.

"I don't want a Stingray," I said firmly. "I want a Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur."

It was the Cadillac of bikes and my folks, surprisingly enough, knew it. After a moment of silence they began to laugh hysterically.

"Yeah, right!" My old man said. "Do you know how much that thing costs?"

"\$99.50," I shot back to which I was bombarded with the inevitable parentalisms.

"Do you think we're made of money? Do you think money grows on trees?"

I laid back down in the back of the wagon, put my hands behind my head, and resigned myself to the fact that there would be no Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur for my birthday. And I was right. My birthday and the ensuing party arrived. After the obligatory mumbling of the song "Happy Birthday" by my mom and the gang and cake all around, I opened the present from my folks – a *Kooky Kamera*, and oh, was it kooky.

It really was a camera that took sepia toned, grainy photos reminiscent of old Civil War photos. What made this camera unique was that it came in pieces that you had to assemble yourself. Each piece resembled a piece of trash. The tripod it stood on looked like drain pipes from under the bathroom sink; the Kodak flashcube it used sat in a beat up aluminum saucepan; the lens looked like an old rusty Campbell Soup can. Again, cool, but not the bike of my dreams.

The party ended and my friends decided to ride their bikes down to the sweet shop on Main Street to check out the new comics.

"See you in about an hour, Joe?" Badger chuckled as he hopped onto the brand new Stingray that his folks gave him for his own birthday a few weeks earlier. The gang saddled up and laughed as Badger triumphantly led the pack down the street.

It was a known fact that I would be walking to the sweet shop. Yes, I had a bike. It was a Schwinn but I called it the Schwartz - the Schwartz Studebaker. What a God-awful bike it was. I'd rather walk than be caught dead riding it and I'm sure the fine town folk were happy about that decision, too. It was a menace to society. The spokes on this bike would pop out at the most

in-opportune moments, usually as I was passing someone walking down the sidewalk. The metal would whack them mercilessly in the legs as I passed. Then there was the bolt that held the seat at just the right height for me to ride. It would never stay tight and would loosen just enough so that whenever I hit a bump the seat would crash down and my knees wound up around my ears.

To this day, the great state of New Jersey's Department of Transportation requires cars and trucks to be inspected annually. Every year you would take your vehicle to a specified location where D.O.T. officials would make sure that your horn worked, your headlights were properly aligned, and your car's emissions were low. If you passed they would slap a green sticker with the month the car passed inspection emblazoned on it to the inside of your windshield and you were good to go until the following year. If you failed, you would get the dreaded red sticker which meant that you had to have the problems corrected and then come back within so many days and wait in line to have it re-inspected.

That sounds simple enough until you take into account just how many people drive cars in northern New Jersey. The population is so immense, so huge that having your car inspected is an all-day event. I've heard of people dying of starvation while waiting in line to have their car inspected. When I was finally old enough to have a car of my own and was able to drive, my inspection station was located in the town of Lodi. Even though it had nothing to do with my situation and it was about Lodi, California, and not Lodi, New Jersey, that Creedence Clearwater Revival song would play in an endless loop in my head as I waited for hours in the inspection line: "Oh, Lord, stuck in Lodi again."

My little village had a similar policy for bicycles. To help raise money for whatever reason, you could take your bike to the police station and for a quarter, they would inspect your bike for you. They would check the tightness of the chain, make sure everything was tight and lubricated, and make sure the tires were inflated properly. If you passed you received a green sticker to put on your bike. I would regularly ride my junker to police headquarters and have it inspected, its spokes whacking people along the way. The police would just laugh at me.

"Here," they'd chortle. "Here's a sticker! Take it! Keep your quarter!"

Oh, the humiliation.

And to top it off, just to show you how ratty the bike was, at school there was row upon row of bike racks so you could ride your bike to school and park it for the day. You'd position the front wheel between the bars and then lock the wheel tightly to the rack with a padlock so no one could steal it. I would purposely leave mine sans lock in hopes of someone stealing it. They never did.

Before you could say, "Jack Frost nipping at your nose", it was Christmas Eve. I had begged and pleaded for a new bike for months only to have my pleas blocked by my parents. I went to the local W.T. Grants department store where I told my sad story to a not-so-convincing Santa that had garlic and Taylor Ham scented breath, but he just gave me the cold shoulder, a candy cane, and sent me on my way without even a Merry Christmas.

That year, the northeast was facing a bitterly cold and miserable winter, even for us kids. On Christmas Eve, the snow was waist deep and the wind was numbing and blew right through

my 30-inches of winter survival gear. My mom asked me to run down the street to pick up a last minute loaf of bread before the stores shut down for the holiday. I scurried downtown and on the way back I lost a boot in an enormous snow drift. I wouldn't find that boot again until the spring thaw. I ran all the way home from the grocery store hobbling along like a horse that had thrown a shoe wearing only a sock on one foot.

As the sun began to set, the streets came alive painting a very Norman Rockwellesque picture. The snow glistened as the street lights winked on; the smell of baking oatmeal raisin and chocolate chip cookies wafted through the air; the sound of several kids caroling "Silent Night" could be heard in the distance.

Christmas lights of all colors flickered on outside of the homes that lined the street. Across the street from our house, Mr. Kaufman flicked on his usual string of solid blue lights that had the most amazing effect on the newly fallen snow. There must have been a million bulbs in his display and when he powered them up the lights in the entire neighborhood dimmed a bit.

My sister was just turning on our own lights as I raced into the yard. The bulbs were humungous jobbers. They must have been 60-watts or more in size not like these dinky bulbs today. They were bright enough to light the front sidewalk and half the street. Heck, you could almost heat the entire house with the warmth these things put out.

The house we were renting was, well, weird. There were only two ways to gain entry. The first way was through the front door that opened into an enclosed porch which then led into the living room. The second door was on the side of the house and it opened into what should have been a mudroom or utility room but instead, it was the downstairs half bathroom. This proved to provide many awkward moments for the Cuhaj family. It was always a surprise when you'd fly up the stairs and throw the door open. You never knew if someone was in the room doing their business and had forgotten to lock the door.

I raced up to this side door and threw it open. Sure enough, the door flung open and hit someone behind it with a thud. It was my old man.

"Da-hell you doin'?" He shouted. "Go around the front!"

I halfheartedly apologized and ran into the front porch. An old cast iron radiator creaked and moaned as it struggled to pump out enough warmth to heat the room. I took off my mittens, scarf, and my now saturated socks, and put them on its hot metal vanes to dry.

The lights in the living room were low. The Christmas tree we had painstakingly picked out from dozens of others at Crazy Berkowski's Tree Emporium towered in a corner next to the stairs that led up to the bedrooms on the second floor. The tree was adorned with several strands of multi-colored lights and a good ton of silvery, shiny tinsel. A rotating translucent color disc of red, blue, and white sat a few feet before it, turning serenely before a spotlight bulb, showering the tree with a psychedelic pattern onto the already color drenched conifer.

My mother, God love her, had packed a small 3-foot by 4-foot coffee table with every imaginable type of confection. There were sugar cookies, peanut butter cookies, spice cookies, divinity, chocolate and peanut butter fudge, bowls full of white and red peppermints, milk

chocolate footballs, ribbon candy. Not an inch of table could be seen and it groaned under the weight. All of this was for Santa and the old boy deserved it.

My sisters and I had a family tradition. Every Christmas Eve at about this time in the evening, we would gather around the television. This was a big night for TV watching at our house because the most popular shows of the holiday season were aired. It all began with the *Andy Williams Christmas Special* and that black bear he interacted with, Cookie Bear. No kidding. That was his name.

Following Andy was the *King Family Christmas Special* with special guest Alvin Ray and his Talking Guitar. I don't know about the rest of the world but I could do without the King Family. Just bring on the younger King member, Tina Cole! She was the stuff dreams were made of for boys of our generation. Tina was enough to even make the guys in the gang watch *My Three Sons* when she was added to the cast, something we'd never do normally.

Then there was the classic Rankin and Bass production of *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer*, a masterful piece of television if ever there was one. The songs, the animated figures, and the Norelco commercial that had Santa Claus gliding down a snowy hill on a triple head electric shaver that was so seamlessly blended into the program you believed it was actually a scene from the show. *Rudolph* seemed to last forever. Take out the razor commercial and it was probably only ten minutes long.

Before I could settle in for the holiday festivities, though, I had to complete my mission. I darted into the kitchen and handed my mom the bread. I peeked around the corner and saw that the bathroom door was ajar and through the crack, I could see my old man inside. He sat on the toilet with a pile of screws, springs, nuts, and bolts strewn about the floor. He was reading out loud from a large paper diagram that covered his face. He was building something.

"Screw 'A' is threaded through bar 'B' then clamped to bar 'C'," he mumbled to himself.

I walked in and immediately my eyes lit up. Instantly I knew what he was doing. I had hit the mother lode! He was putting together a Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur! I swore I heard the *Hallelujah Chorus* being sung by a heavenly choir at that very moment, but then I realized that the song was coming from the television in the other room.

"Hey!" Dad shouted pointing a wrench at me. "Get that look off your face!"

"But dad!" I shouted like a schoolgirl. "It's my bike!"

"It's not *your* bike," he said going back to work. "Creep's dad bought this for him for Christmas. I'm putting it together over here for his Dad so Creep won't find it."

My heart sank, no, it crashed right through the floor. In an instant my dreams were squashed. Creep was getting my bike.

I walked back through the kitchen where my mother, not looking up once from the kielbasa and sauerkraut she was boiling on the stove, announced that dinner was almost ready.

"I'm not hungry," I sobbed.

I shuffled my feet as I made my way to the living room, my head hung low between my shoulders. My sisters just sat there and for the first time in their lives they knew that it was not the right time to make a snide remark. They watched me slowly walk up the stairs to my room.

I couldn't sleep at all that night. Thoughts of Creep gliding to and from school on his Schwinn haunted me. I thought of ingenious plans to abscond the bike from him. Maybe I could steal it and ride it off to Mexico until the heat was off? Or maybe I could...no. I just had to resign myself to the fact that I was still bike-less.

I hopped into bed and stared out of the bedroom window into the darkness. A lone streetlight across the street shimmered with a yellow glow. I stared at it and began fading in and out of that twilight zone before sleep. Occasionally I caught myself dozing and my eyes would pop back open to refocus on the lamp. Silhouetted in that yellowish light I could see something float by. Then again. Before I knew it, it looked like a giant pillow fight going on outside the window. It was snowing again. The world was silent as it fell, accumulating deeper and deeper. Before long I was fast asleep.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of shouting from downstairs. It was my dad.

"Don't you know what day it is?" he shouted up the stairs. "Get a move on!"

"Yeah," Joyce yelled. "We're waiting on you dweeb!"

"Shh," my mother scolded.

For the first time ever I wasn't the first one up on Christmas morning. There was just no hurry today. I walked down the stairs with my head hanging low thinking that this would be the worst day of my life. I slowly made the turn on the bottom landing and before I stepped off and into the living room. I looked up at the tree. Even with the heart crushing disappointment I was about to face I saw the beauty in that tree. I gazed at the star that topped its peak and scanned down the branches until my gaze reached the floor. And that's when I saw it.

Amidst all of the shiny paper and bows, neatly parked before that spectacularly lit tree, standing stoically and majestically with a glowing golden aura surrounding it from the tree lights and the color light wheel - it was the Schwinn 10-speed Deraillleur!

I ran to it and hopped on. I played with the breaks and put a death grip on the handle bars as I jerked the front wheel from side to side to get a feel for its action.

My parents stood off to the side, a satisfied smile on each of their faces. My own smile spread from ear to ear, the joy was gushing out of me like a geyser, but then, my smile vanished and I stopped fiddling with the bike as a thought occurred to me. I sat there for a moment then turned to look at my parents. Slowly, ever so slowly, reality set in. It came to me from out of nowhere, like a bolt out of the blue. How could I have been so stupid for all of these years? Of course! It all made sense now! I had finally discovered the secret of Santa Claus!

Other kids had known the secret for a long time. All of those stories I had heard about Santa were true and they all made perfect sense. I was only a bit upset with the revelation, but understood completely. I came to realize that Santa couldn't possibly bring all of those big presents to every kid in the world in one night let alone getting them down all of those small chimneys. It was up to the parents to give the big gifts!

That year I wrote a long letter to Santa and thanked him for the bajillion "some-assembly-required" toys that kept my old man grumbling way past New Year's Day, and then made sure that I gave my mom and dad a huge hug, probably the first in many years, and

whispered a thank you to them before I took the Schwinn out the front door and onto the sidewalk for a test drive.

A Wish Book Christmas

by Joe Cuhaj

Sears

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Down through the years, people have...

...because of the imaginative products and ideas that dreams are made of



A Wish Book Christmas

If there is one thing during the Christmas holidays that really makes me wince is when people say, “Christmas just isn’t what it used to be.”

That is the most obvious statement in the world, isn’t it? I mean, of course it isn’t like it used to be. That’s the way life is. It continually moves forward, morphing as the years go by. Every year that passes finds our traditions changing, our interests changing, our culture changing, and more noticeably, our technology changing. So, no, Christmas is not the same as it was even just a few years ago.

For those of you reading this who are late Baby Boomers like myself, I truly believe that we grew up in the golden age of Christmas celebrations. I don’t mean that in a mean spirited way nor am I suggesting that the Christmas’ of the 1960s and early 1970s were better than anyone else’s. I just think that it was an amazing time to grow up. So many of the traditions, television shows, and toys that we take for granted today were created during that time period. So many, in fact, that they have become embedded in all of our Christmas psyche.

But you have to remember how different the times were back then and the conditions that were ripe for these holiday traditions to catch hold around the country. The kids of the 60s and 70s were truly united as one at Christmas time and no matter where you lived, from New York to California and every place in between, we were all united by two things, the first was television.

Unlike today where we have an unlimited number of channels to choose from - or as Bruce Springsteen opined, “57 channels and nothing on”, but now it’s more like 4,000 channels and nothing on – kids across the country only had a handful of options when it came to television viewing. Maybe you lived in the smallest town in America with only one or two static filled black and white channels, or maybe you lived in a major metropolitan area like I did where we had a whopping seven channels. Either way, it didn’t matter. You were still limited to your viewing options and inevitably, all across the country, all of us kids would be watching the same TV shows. It was an irrevocable bond that bound millions of us together.

That limitation had one major drawback – there were no reruns. Today, if you wanted to watch the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, you can be sure that it’s streaming somewhere online or running as a marathon over and over again on TBS in the middle of June. But back then, you had one shot to catch a show otherwise you would have to wait until the following year to see it and if you did miss it, you would be shunned like a leper on the playground at school.

In the middle of the school day, we would have recess where we would go outside and play some major welt inducing dodge ball, bust our knees falling from towering monkey bars onto the hard playground pavement, or we would just hang out and talk. The latter was much like hanging around the watercooler in an office. We’d shoot the breeze and inevitably the conversation would turn to the TV shows from the previous night.

I clearly remember when the Rankin and Bass production, *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer*, first premiered on TV in 1964. It was an amazing show, something we had never seen before – perfect stop-motion animation, a gripping story of acceptance, and catchy tunes that stuck in your head like a spitball on a chalkboard. And the commercials were simply marketing genius. Right in the middle of the show, here comes a stop-motion Santa Claus riding down a snowy hillside on a Norelco Triple Head razor. It was a stinking commercial but it blended in so seamlessly to the show, that we just thought Santa had a new ride. It was creative, and it worked.

Rudolph was the talk of the playground the next day. And whoa be the kid who missed it. They were mocked for missing the show and not being cool and hip. They would have to wait a full year to see what all of the fuss was about.

There were dozens of great shows that first debuted back in those days that are still loved to today: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Year without a Santa Claus*. Come on, admit it. You can't get the songs sung by Heat Miser and Snow Miser out of your head to this very day.

When you stop and think about it, 50 years ago, the holiday television watching season - and the Christmas shopping season, for that matter - didn't start until Thanksgiving afternoon. The reason for this was the Macy's department store. It wasn't the calendar or Santa Claus that controlled when the Christmas season began. It was Macy's and their Thanksgiving Day Parade. Before that parade rolled, you wouldn't see a single Santa Claus ringing a bell on a street corner or festive holiday window displays in stores. There was no indication that Christmas was coming, but when the Macy's parade wrapped up with Santa riding atop the final float, it was like the store flipped a giant switch and told the world, "You may now go Christmas shopping."

And just like that, everything jumped to life – suddenly, there were Santa Claus' in all of the department stores, Christmas decorations miraculously appeared and flickered to life around town, and the best holiday shows ever appeared on TV.

There was a second Christmas tradition that unified late Baby Boomers those many years ago and it came to us from another department store. It was a behemoth of a catalog that came in the mail and when we saw it hit the kitchen table, we knew Christmas was on the way and we needed to start writing our letters to Santa pronto. It was the *Sears Christmas Wish Book*. The book was over four inches thick with over 600 pages of color and black and white photos of every imaginable clothing item, gadget, and most importantly, toys that Sears carried.

The book wouldn't even have time to warm up from being outside in the cold winter air of the mailbox before we'd grab it off of the kitchen table, sprawl out on our bellies on the living room floor, and go page by page gawking at all of the remarkable items the Wish Book had to offer. And you really did have to flip through every single page because you never knew where they would hide a gem. Amongst the ladies girdles, for example, there may be an ad for a telescope. One year they scattered Dennis the Menace cartoons throughout the book and you would have to go page by page so that you didn't miss a single panel.

As we settled in to start thumbing through the book, my mom would shout from the kitchen, "Don't EVEN think of writing in that book!"

The writers and editors of the Wish Book knew their stuff. They knew their market inside and out and it showed as you turned to the first page. Everyone I knew always received a pair of pajamas and slippers for Christmas. Every single year. So the marketing whizzes at Sears put those items right up front – wall to wall pajamas, robes, slippers, all of your basic sleep and lounge wear needs.

From there the book transitioned into leather goods like wallets, boots, briefcases, and then into women's lingerie. We were just little kids so we quickly breezed through that section. Ah, youthful innocence.

Then it was a full section of holiday treats. It had a complete line of cookies and popcorn in decorative tins, hard candy like pillow mints and multi-colored ribbon candy, rock hard fruitcakes, even bottles of fake whiskey labeled "Old Grand Gag".

The Wish Book was a real holiday treat year in and year out, but the one year that really stood out and left a lasting impression on me was the 1968 Wish Book. I don't really know why,

but I do know that I was fascinated by a new section they added with “Old World” Christmas gifts. There was all sorts of hand carved wooden items for sale like hand carved wooden schooners with billowing cloth sails, hand carved ashtrays, and hand carved globes, even hand carved hands.

The section also featured authentic reproductions (I’m not kidding, that’s what it said) of Medieval armament like a 5-inch wide, 4-foot long stainless steel sword just like King Arthur’s Excalibur. You could even buy a suit of armor. The ad read:

“In Medieval times, smithies would hammer out spectacular suits of armor that the King’s knights would wear to vanquish threats to the throne or to save damsels in distress. But now, the fine craftsmen at Toledo Steel have handcrafted a 72” tall suit of armor that will amaze your friends when they walk into your home. If you could find an authentic suit of armor, it would cost \$100,000 (author’s note – I really think it would cost much, much more than that!), but now you can own this beautiful suit for only \$1,600!”

Wow! What a bargain and a real conversation piece.

But finally, we would arrive at the toy section. This section always started with the lamest toys ever created. For example, there were ventriloquist dummies, a real career choice. You could get a Jerry Mahoney or Charlie McCarthy dummy for only \$5.99.

There was the *Fun Box*. Apparently the company that created this toy had toys left over from previous years that no kid wanted to play with like jacks, dominos, and Chinese checkers. They just tossed them into a box and sold it as a collection of “classic games”.

Sears had its own “box” – the *Super Box*, and that’s all it was. For \$4.99 you could buy your kid a plain box. It might have an airplane or rocket ship painted on the side, but it was still just a box. Times were much simpler then, friends. How much did that PlayStation cost you this year, Santa?

Finally, we moved into the really great toys like unicycles. I was so uncoordinated as a kid that I would fall down walking on flat ground, so a unicycle would be a stretch for me, but I really wanted one. Never got it, though.

And of course, there were dozens of bicycles for sale. A lot of kids I knew got new bikes for Christmas. Were you one of those? And did you live in an area where you would get ten feet of snow around the holidays? Then you were probably like me, taking the new bike out on the icy sidewalks to give it a test drive. Too bad they didn’t make snow chains for bicycles.

Eventually, the toy section became segregated into two categories – boys and girls. Both sections were very stereotypical. Boys were supposed to play army, girls were supposed to play homemaker. The girls section always had pages of ironing boards, baby dolls, and kitchen play sets. None of the girls in the gang – Denise, Donna, Martha, and Gianna – none of them ever wanted anything like that. They’d much rather have a microscope. Or maybe a rock tumbler. I never fully understood rock tumblers. I always thought, why not just use your mom’s clothes dryer? Same thing, isn’t it? (Kids, do not try that at home!)

There was one game they all loved, though – *Mystery Date*. “Would your date be a dream? Or a dud?” Every time I saw that commercial on TV, I vowed to myself that I would never be a dud. I don’t think I succeeded.

There were many other toys and games that came out of that period that are still enjoyed today: *Barrel of Monkeys*, *Rock ‘em Sock ‘em Robots*, *Battleship* (not Electronic Battleship but the original with actual pegs that you’d track your progress sinking your opponent’s ships with and explosion sounds that you had to make yourself), and of course, *Twister*.

Twister was a game where you and your friends had to put your hands and feet on randomly selected color circles with all of you ending up getting tangled with one another. This was a really fun game when you became teenagers.

The boy's section had some really neat toys but most of them were later recalled and put on the Child Safety Recall List and banned. Toys like the *Whamo Air Blaster*. It looked like a handheld hair dryer but it had a trigger and a lever. Cock the lever, pull the trigger, and a cyclone of air blasted from the barrel. It was a hoot except that kids would cock the gun and point it at someone's ear, blowing out their ear drum.

There was the *Robot Commando*. I had one of these. It slung rock hard glass marbles putting welts on your pet cat, holes in plaster walls, broke vases, even put bruises on your sister's head, but I deny that ever happened.

And the best toy of them all – the *Thing Maker*. There were two versions of the *Thing Maker*, with one version you could make little plastic army soldiers. With the other, you could make rubber bugs, spiders, and snakes.

Basically the Thing Maker was a bare metal hot plate. Plug it into the wall and heat it up. Then take one of the thick aluminum molds, fill it with this stuff called “Plastic Goop”, and cook it on top of the hot plate. In a few minutes, voila! A new toy! Now, the instructions did said that we were supposed to let the mold cool before removing it from the hot plate, but heck, we were kids and in a hurry! We had a new toy! Just ignore those third degree burns.

Oh, the Sears Christmas Wish Book. A remarkable Christmas memory and tradition that is sadly going by the wayside as Sears' files for bankruptcy. Even still, its memory will linger on.

Here's to you, Wish Book. May you rest in peace.