

In our house, both my grandmothers came for the holidays.

THE DAY THE WORLD CHANGED

On that snowy Christmas Eve so long ago, my grandmother Rickert did something extraordinary. The holiday hasn't been the same since. By Camilla R. Bittle

Like most people, I feel nostalgic at Christmas. Fond memories of mincemeat pie, Christmas cookies, peppermint-stick ice cream, even my mother's steamed pudding—though I didn't particularly like it as a child—all bring back the sights and smells of Christmases past . . . especially those spent with my two grandmothers.

My mother's brother married my father's sister, and my two grandmothers spent half the year with my family in Mt. Herndon, Mass., and half with Uncle David and Aunt Emma, who lived 40 miles away in Holyoke. The grandmothers were rarely in either house at the same time except for Christmas, when we all celebrated together. They were lovely ladies and we cared for them both, but they had distinctly different personalities. If we had had to choose a favorite, we would have picked Grandmother Babson.

Grandmother Babson, quick

and bright, had a radio in her room—the only one in our house in 1938—and on Sunday evenings she'd invite us up to listen to Jack Benny and Charlie McCarthy. Grandma Rickert, who was frail and spoke with a tremor, didn't have a radio and didn't want one. She complained that radios were noisy and spent her time knitting, as though under divine command, to furnish us with enough caps and mittens to last a lifetime. She preferred to read the Bible—which she did every single day.

Each grandmother had her own small room in our white clapboard New England house. Grandmother Babson had a bookcase full of books, and she would often read aloud to us. She also had a trunk with drawers and clothes hangers that she'd packed full of brightly colored clothes.

Grandma Rickert's room was furnished with antiques from her old home. She'd arrive with a big satchel that held her knitting, her glasses, her handkerchiefs, and her Bible, and a battered old bag

that contained her dresses, mostly black, and several framed, faded photographs of deceased relatives. She wore glasses and had thinning yellow-white hair. She never left the house without a hat.

Grandmother Babson had white hair too. She wore the same kind of black-laced shoes as Grandma Rickert's, but hers were cut lower and even had a modest heel. In the morning she dressed in a flowered cotton housedress, but when she came down for the tea in the afternoon, she wore a silk dress.

Grandmother Babson acknowledged the arrival of the Christmas season by making marmalade—a long process that we'd sit and watch as if she were performing magic. She cut the peel in precise, tiny chips, soaked it in water overnight, boiled it, added sugar, and boiled it some more. For three days the house smelled deliciously of oranges and lemons. Grandma Rickert never made anything, but would help peel potatoes and shell peas. I didn't think much of this utilitarian work then, but now I can appreciate how much help it must have been to my mother.

Neither grandmother had any money, but Grandmother Babson did have her teacher's pension, which was just enough to stretch

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Illustration by Robert Hunt



AY THE WORLD CHANGED

continued

to small Christmas gifts for her nine grandchildren, including me, my two sisters, and my brother. I never knew her husband—my grandfather—who died slowly and painfully and left Grandmother with four children and no adequate means of support. For a number of years she struggled to keep his small mail-order business going, but eventually she returned to schoolteaching. Despite her troubles, she had risen to meet life's challenges.

In contrast, Grandma Rickert had seemed defeated almost from the start. She and my grandfather, a rather silent man, had been given a farm, a house, and a prize horse when they were married, but they were dogged by bad luck. Early on the horse stumbled, broke a leg, and had to be destroyed. My grandfather came down with typhoid fever and was never the same again, and Grandma had a baby a year for ten years, three of whom died in infancy. When her husband died, all pretense of farming stopped and Grandma Rickert took to the road, making brief visits to her now-grown children. No wonder her voice quavered and she sat with her Bible and knitting, I thought.

As with most families, there was a ritual to our Christmases. By 1938 we children were old enough to go caroling by ourselves on Christmas Eve. We'd start out at five o'clock, when it was already dark, the stars brilliantly shining. Home by six, we tore off our coats and caps and went into the living room, where the fire blazed. By 6:30 we were in the dining room eating scalloped oysters and fruit salad and mincemeat pie, and when the dishes were washed and put away, back we all went to the living room. We wanted to hear the classic tale about the night before Christmas, which Grandmother Babson read aloud before we went to bed.

As she wove her spell, I could almost feel myself tucked into bed, with visions of sugarplums dancing over the ceiling, and then was sure I heard sleigh bells and the whoosh of sound as Santa came down the chimney. When Grandmother put down the book, we were ready for bed. But that year something happened that forever changed not just Christmas, but my perceptions—and my judgment—of people.

"Now," said Grandmother Babson, "wouldn't it be nice if your Grandmother Rickert would read us the Bible account of Christ's birth?"

I'm ashamed to say I wasn't taken with the suggestion. That part of Christmas seemed to belong to Sunday

School, and I wasn't looking forward to a boring "lesson."

Grandma Rickert replied quietly that she didn't have either her Bible or her spectacles downstairs—but this didn't daunt Grandmother Babson. "I wouldn't be surprised if you could recite it by heart, Mrs. Rickert," she said.

For a moment I thought Grandma Rickert hadn't understood, for she gazed into the fireplace as though she were miles away. Was she thinking back over all her Christmases past when her life had been overburdened with sickness and sorrow?

Then, without taking her eyes from the fire, she began. "And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. . . ."

Her voice, clear and authoritative, lent an authentic power to her storytelling, and the familiar characters began to come to life as they never had before. I closed my eyes and imagined Joseph and Mary as they must actually have been—wary and resigned. The stable, a crude, rough place heated only by the breath of animals, was no more than a shelter where two flesh-and-blood people fulfilled their extraordinary destiny.

Grandma Rickert's tone was so strong, so sure, I wondered if she looked that way too. The thought flashed through my mind that under the spell of Christmas this ordinarily reserved woman might have somehow changed. I opened my eyes to see—but she hadn't. Her face was still pale, her shoulders stooped. Yet there was a difference—and at that moment I took my first real step toward understanding that it is a mistake to judge people by what they appear to have or what they lack. And every word of her story seemed to validate that idea.

Mary and Joseph had nothing. Their child was a helpless baby. The stable was cold, the shepherds were afraid. But the world changed the day that little baby, who brought us the news of a loving and merciful God, was born.

None of us said a word when Grandma Rickert finished speaking. There was something almost magical in the silence, as if she had taken us on a journey and now we were back and ready for Christmas. Our less-popular grandmother had more depth than we realized, and we lined up to kiss her good night with a new appreciation.

Grandma Rickert's character didn't really change after that, of course—but her role in our annual traditions did. For many years she became the "family storyteller," who, for one brief shining moment, brought the true spirit of Christmas to our hearts. And even today, when Christmas comes, I still see her and hear her story almost as though she were here. ★

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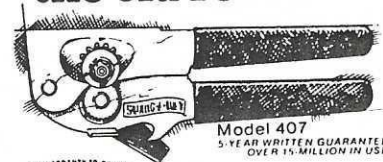
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