

It has been a lot of years since I've hung up a Christmas stocking on Christmas Eve. We did not have a fireplace in our house, and, consequently, no mantel from which to hang children's stockings. Many homes were in the same situation, of course, and various solutions were found. In our house, we had a big, heavy rolltop desk. We hung our stockings from the front edge of that piece of furniture. Decades later, long after children were grown and gone, my mother had that desk refinished. I wondered if evidence of its holiday use would be obliterated, but it was not. There are still small holes in the edge of the oak desk where our father hung our biggest socks with small finishing nails.

These days, I hear people talking about shopping for "stocking stuffers." There were no such things in our house, and I suspect that most of other children of our era found about the same standards in their Christmas stockings as we did.

The contents were pretty much the same from year to year, but that did not mean that we lacked anticipation. In many ways, though we would get a modest wrapped present or two in addition, the treats in the stockings were the most eagerly awaited part of Christmas morning.

Each of our stockings contained candy, nuts, and an orange. We found mixed Christmas candy, the assorted hard candies and others with a little jellylike filling. The "raspberries" were my favorites, and they still are. There were also a few chocolate drops in with the hard confections. Fondant shaped into small cones and dipped in chocolate still tastes as good as it did then. After the raspberries and chocolate drops, I looked for the peanut shaped candies that consisted of a thin shell surrounding a peanut butter filling. I don't think I've seen any of them for some time, but maybe they still make an appearance in candy mixes. Finally, I looked to see if there might be a piece of "ribbon" candy with cinnamon flavor. Everything else was eventually consumed, of course, but there was this predictable order to my eating.

The nuts in our stockings were usually mostly peanuts in the shells with a few Brazil nuts, pecans, walnuts, almonds, and filberts among them. I liked them all.

The fact that Santa Claus had brought the stockings made the contents taste even better. There was something exciting about believing in Saint Nicholas and thinking about his great journey every Christmas Eve, bringing the holiday to children all over the world. I don't remember that anyone ever enlightened me about who had really filled those stockings. Knowledge came gradually, I believe, as I became old enough to see the improbability of such an act. I don't think I was ever particularly disillusioned by the realization that a single Santa, giving and delivering gifts all over the world on one night, was a myth. Instead, I began to see how important this idea of "giving" is, whether it is Saint Nicholas or each of us who is showing generosity.

There is something about hanging up that Christmas stocking, though. I wonder what might happen if I hung mine up this year. We don't have a mantel in our cabin, either, but there are plenty of places to hang a stocking. But, perhaps, it is best to let that custom stay with the children. Recently, I saw Runo looking interestedly at a pile of small lumps of coal for sale in one of the farm stores.