

A Farm Country Christmas

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The memories of sixteen writers, poets and artists of their country Christmases, ranging from the early years of this century through the 1940s, are a nostalgic mix of heartwarming stories. There is the warmth of the aromatic farm kitchen, home-made mince meat wafting on the air and the great fire in the hearth after dragging in the wood; there is also the chill of poverty with the only gift an orange or a small celluloid doll. Rost-Holtz includes brief, informal essays and some excerpts from the contributors' magazine articles as well as excerpts from books. These writings recall holidays in the country, mainly in the Midwest, but also in a few other places such as upstate New York and on a California Christmas tree farm.

Whatever the experience, each is recounted with an individual personality that rings true to a farm Christmas. There are accounts of traditions, cutting wagonloads of greens to cover every mantel, door and window in the farmhouse, the surprise of visitors and treats and the frustration of Junior being sick at Christmas.

There is humor, too, as cookbook author Edna Lewis recalls each family meal transformed to feast, children having full access to the sideboard loaded with hams, pickles and pies—a gastronomic indulgence so huge that her mother anticipated stomach aches. “But at the end of the holiday week we were all given a home-brewed physic which was really vile! It was so vile I’ve never quite forgotten the taste of it.”

Or, when farmyard philosopher, Peter McArthur, recalls the bitter cold of his childhood holidays with the doggerel, “A winter fog will freeze a dog.” The selections, taken together, including pieces from writers such as radio-TV personality Garrison Keillor and cartoonist Ben Logan, provide a kaleidoscopic view of rustic celebration, each adding to the spirit of farm holidays.

The book's artistic goal is clear and well met: old photographs evoke farm life several decades ago and others provide thoughtful winter nature photography. The compositions of black and white cows against red barns remind one of the poetry of imagism; each element, color, line and shape enhancing the others resulting in a pleasing, unified whole. They attest to Marilyn Wynn's rapport with animals. Wynn's camera work with a Shetland pony's head, reluctantly wreathed in fir and holly, will return readers to the book. Sandi Wickersham's Grandma Moses-type, primitive paintings echo the nostalgic spirit of the text. Further, they are amusing since she always includes the pig-tailed girl she was and her trusty Labrador Retriever. Finding them in her panoramas is a puzzle for young readers.

Mature readers may have the pleasure of indulging in memories of their own Christmases past that the book is certain to evoke.

SALLY KETCHUM (November / December 1999)

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