Memories of Christmas Past, By Fraser Hale, Sr.

I used to feel very sorry for those who lacked a surrounding family with which to share the joys of Christmas. I haven’t felt quite that way since the Christmas of 1966.

As my brothers and sister and I grew up, got married and had families, during the fifties and sixties, we developed a pattern that worked pretty well. We would gather at my parent’s home at around 9:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, hugs and kisses and to the tree.

It is hard to describe that tree and the proliferation of presents under it. Usually there were about eight adults and as many children from newborn to, say, ten – with a present to and from everyone. Father, whose main hobby was shopping had bought at least two for everyone – his generosity and sense of “fair” would not let him do more for one than another. In truth, it was a vulgar display! But, in no time at all, enshrouded by unbelievable noise, shrieks of delight, paper and ribbons flying everywhere and, usually honest shouts of appreciation, it was all over – an hour at most.

My group then went to Bev’s parents’ where, as she is an only child, our children were the only grandchildren. No less generous were they, but much, much more ritualistic. – the presents opened by each were observed, acknowledged and appreciated by all before the next was presented to be opened, carefully, with no paper torn – the ritual taking at least two hours.

This worked fine for years. After a light lunch and an afternoon rest appreciated by all ages, we would return to my parents’ home where all the Hale tribe would could manage it and sometimes a guest or two would gather for Christmas Turkey Dinner. It was, usually, an early dinner because one or more couples had little ones who had to get home to bed.

All very pleasant – until 1966!

That was the year my in-laws decided it would only be fair if we had our Christmas dinner with them on Christmas day, rather than a day or two later and also the year that brother Peter, his wife and son came from California and so my parents wanted everyone at their place for Christmas Dinner.

In theory, we had it worked out pretty well – up early in Etobicoke, our tree at home, a light breakfast, to my parents’ in Hamilton for the big opening, to the in-laws’ in Ancaster for their tree, a turkey dinner at the crack of noon, a rest (particularly the youngsters ages 11 and 7) and back to my parents’ for an evening turkey dinner – strenuous but manageable.

It probably started to go wrong when we stayed up a half an hour too late and I had half a glass too much on Christmas Eve. Things did not improve when “Screwloose” (my son) decided to forget how to read a clock and got us all up at 5:00 a.m.! In truth, I do not remember much about the start of the day other than the fact that we still got to “Granny’s” on time and before the rest of the family.

Our family had grown from seventeen to nineteen since the last time we had all been together. The noise was unbelievable – and painful. I was by no means the only one suffering from self-inflicted wounds and those who were not rejoiced in our suffering. The three girls were 14, 13 and 11 and if you have ever had anything to do with girls in
that age group, you know that everything is dramatically important and that laughter and tears are interchangeable. There were six boys from twelve to three – wild.

Despite the numbers and noise and the fact that as usual it took more time to clean up the wrappings and broken toys than it did to open the presents, it all went very well and we left at 10:30 with reminders not to be late returning for the family portrait at 4:30.

I have already indicated that things were a little more structured at Bev’s family’s – everything to be done in its proper order. It would be unfair to place the blame on any one individual but someone assumed that as we were not eating until after the gift ritual, preparation for the meal did not need to begin until all presents were opened, each person’s put into a neat little pile and all paper properly folded and each ribbon preserved. It was probably fortunate that one, slightly hung-over individual noticed the turkey on the counter instead of in the oven and inquired, as politely as he was able, just what time the meal was anticipated. The ensuing recriminations and flurry of activity interrupted the ritual and did nothing to add to the joviality of the season. While waiting for the stubborn turkey to cook, I tried, in vain, to happy things up by pouring Christmas spirits; it did not work. If ever I believed the statement that alcohol is a depressant, I did that day.

Sometime between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. we sat down and not before many complaints from a couple of kids who had not eaten since 6:00 a.m. Nevertheless, we ate better than we should have and literally got up from the table to go back to my parents’ to do it all over again. But first, the family portrait.

In 1960, an excellent black and white portrait had been made by a father-and-son team who were Hamilton’s senior studio photographers and old family friends. This Christmas, without warning, Dad had arranged for it to happen again.

Not everyone was on time and few, if any, were still in the jovial Christmas morning mood. The first crisis hit when it was discovered that my son had neither a tie nor a coat with him. After some yelling and a few tears, the necessary garments (a few sizes too big) were picked up from my sister’s house a couple of blocks away.

Getting nineteen people from three generations lined up for a photograph, with everyone’s hair in place is neither quick nor easy task. Once we all got properly in place father noticed that the film was black and white. The ensuing eruption was something to behold – how could anyone be so stupid as to not know he wanted colour! When he shouted, the children cried, the mothers, some of them crying too, tried to comfort the kids, keep them clean and from fighting while the fathers went to the bar. The photographers, usually a jocular pair, already unhappy about working on Christmas, were less than thrilled about going to their studio to change cameras.

Somehow the picture got taken. I have it in front of me now. It is horrible! I can only assume that this was the best of the proofs so the others must have been even worse. A few had made attempts as weak smiles but most of us look miserable. What really surprises me is that sixteen survivors plus one are still talking to each other – well at Christmas anyway. Have a very Merry.