



Glen Elder, KS -- Heritage & History

~ Memoir Lane ~

A Christmas Adventure with Ernie Norris

-- by X Miller, Houston, TX - Great Granddaughter of Lylburn Norris

Often I think of all of the adventures that Ernie and I took during his lifetime. I remember looking for anything or any place made from post rock, digging up fossils, playing with his mechanical musical toys and banks, eating cold watermelon under a tree by the side of the road...and, looking for anything with historical value. I also recall when I was very young helping him chop weeds to feed his deer and other animals in his little zoo, accompanying him on gasoline deliveries to farmers in his gas truck (it had a big phone number "86" painted on the side) while singing what my Grandma considered "bawdy" songs about boarding houses and other WW I tunes. Yet, all of these adventures are insignificant when I remember Christmas at the Norris household with my Uncle Ernie!

Ernie was really into the Christmas spirit. This was back in the early 1930's when most people were still reeling and/or recovering from the terrible depression. Even though my Grandfather lost a fortune in the stock market crash, I suppose that we were much better off than lots of folks back then. This was more especially true because my Grandma Carrie had many very wealthy relatives in New York who would supply me with cartons and cartons of very nice Christmas gifts. Besides this, my Mom would send boxes and boxes of things that were supposed to help me remember her way out there in West Texas. Our Christmas Eve at the Norris household was always spent opening these wonderful offerings when we returned from evening Church services.

My Grandma Carrie was always afraid that so many wonderful gifts would change me into a very spoiled child, so she let me open every present I would receive, and then I had the hard choice to choose between every single present and select only my three favorite things. Very hard to do for a small child, I might add. Try taking a very young child to a toy store and then say, "You can have anything that you want, but ONLY three things." Now, we had to very carefully unwrap these wonderful gifts. We couldn't muss or tear the wrappings, or never, ever, break the ribbons. After my three choices were made, my Grandma would very carefully write on a tuck-in label what each package contained, (Was it appropriate for a boy, girl, age, etc...) and rewrap anything I was not especially fond of, or even a favorite, if it didn't make the top three cut. This went on for several years until the time that I finally found out that there was no Santa, and at that time I also found out what had actually been happening to my unselected gifts.

On this wonderful Christmas Eve I was given the first opportunity to see just what happened to these leftovers. Uncle Ernie dressed up in a Santa Costume with a pillow for a belly, that he certainly wouldn't have needed later in life. He would load every gift into big Burlap bags (Toe Sacks) with carefully written instructions from my Grandma as to which route to take, the children's names, sex, and ages, which children's gift went to which family, and what other items each family truly needed. We would make many trips between the Garage and the surrounding countryside in his (loaded to the rooftop) wonderful old 1928 Whippet coupe, making deliveries to widows, orphans, and farmer's with agricultural injuries or other illnesses. The children's Christmas presents, one of my Grandma's great homemade fruit cakes, and always lots of candy, were left at the door along with large sacks of sugar, beans, flour, ham, my Grandpa Norris' wonderful homegrown Glen Elder potatoes, and other necessities including children's clothing and shoes. In some cases, nice new bills for the adults, and always shiny silver dollars for each of the children were included. Ernie always insisted that the bank give him bills and silver dollars that were brand new. After the gifts were placed by the doorway, Ernie always gave a rousing "HO, HO, HO, Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night" before we drove away.

It was wonderful to be able to stay up very, very late to help Ernie make other people happy, but part of my learning experience was that I could never reveal that the children's gifts had belonged to me, or that my Uncle had made the deliveries. (Although I'm certain that some people knew.) My Grandma told me that when bad things happen to good people they did not want the community to know that they needed help, so it had to remain our secret. Without our meager offerings, some of these families would have nothing for Christmas. What a great joy it was to know that we were able to share our

Christmas. Even bamboo shoots under my fingernails could not have made me divulge that Christmas gift information back then.

At that time, Ernie also gave away a Christmas stocking to every child in Glen Elder. There was always a silver dollar stuffed in the toe of the stocking. I helped fill the stockings and the kids had to sign for their gift. Needless to say, some enterprising young boys would always try to sign a fictitious name or the name of a friend, until my Uncle would tell them that he could not abide people who did not tell the truth. His story made many a boy head for home crying. He also provided household gifts for the women. I am still using knives, and other kitchen utensils that were leftovers from some of Ernie's Christmas give-a-ways. More recent Glen Elder residents probably did not know of his earlier generosity to the community, but his Christmas benevolence alone has provided me with a spirit of giving that has followed me through life. These are such pleasant memories of my Uncle that I just thought you might like to share!