

THE ASSOCIATION OF MIT RETIREES



MEMOIR COLLECTION

January 2012, #1

ABOUT THE MEMOIR CLASS

*The Association of MIT Retirees introduced a memoir writing workshop for members in February 2011. This class of dedicated writers is led by **Nita Regnier**, Association advisory committee member and former instructor in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies in the Writing Center. The writers have produced fine work which they wish to share. While the stories represent a wide range of experiences and generations, some reminiscences may resonate with you and perhaps generate a flashback or two.*

*During 2012 the Association will feature work by each class member. Our first story is by **Karen Keefe Luxton** who worked at MIT for 36 years, most recently with the MIT Energy Initiative, and retired in 2009.*

WHY WRITE A MEMOIR

I told my boss of 30 years that I was going to take a memoir-writing course with a group of other MIT retirees, and he asked me, "What are you going to write about?"

Though there was no hint of sarcasm in his question, I took immediate offense. I wish I'd said, "The three summers I spent at clown school when I was a teenager. My trip to the Antarctic in my twenties. All the foster children I cared for after I got married." Instead, I made some lame response like, "Things from my childhood."

The fact is that I don't have an exciting personal history that the world is dying to read about. I've lived a fairly ordinary life with just a sprinkling of joy, danger, and despair; but I'm getting older, and my memories are not so sharp as they used to be. I'm beginning to think about (and fear) my own mortality; and like most folks, I wish to be remembered.

My only son hasn't the slightest interest in my former life. Not now, anyway. But I learned the most intriguing things about my own mother when I was in my fifties and she was in her late seventies. What she told me explained a lot of things that I hadn't understood, and had badly MIS-understood, while I was growing up. I'd like to spare my son all the unanswered questions that might arise after I'm gone. So, just in case his current lack of interest outlives his mother, I'd like to get some of it down on paper. He'll be glad I did.

— Karen Keefe Luxton

CHRISTMAS IN THE FIFTIES

In the good old days, when we were children, Christmas was a very big deal. Back then, it was a discrete season, compressed in time — not spread over so many months that you were pretty sick of it by the time it actually arrived. On the day after Thanksgiving there would be a parade in Beverly. Local politicians, with leading members of the Lion's Club and the Knights of Columbus, would march down Cabot Street trailing some shivering boy scout troops. The local high school band would march behind them in full regalia, mangling "Jingle Bells" and other familiar carols. Each year, at the very end of the parade, there would be a red and green decorated float for Santa Claus. He'd sit in a throne wearing his bright red suit with his long white beard blowing in the chilly wind. He'd wave to all the children and bellow HO, HO, HO through a bull horn, and the Christmas season would officially begin.



There wasn't much crass commercialism back then. There were no malls — just a downtown district that featured a Woolworth's 5 & 10, a W.T. Grant's, a Rexall Drugstore, assorted specialty stores, the YMCA, the Ware Theatre,

and assorted banks and churches. The Beverly Chamber of Commerce would drape modest pine garlands over the main street and hang illuminated outlines of bells and stars in the center of the garlands. Most of the stores would have a tree with ornaments and more garlands around the windows, and a public speaker would blare "Silver Bells" and "Joy to the World" onto the city street. There weren't a lot of TV's back then, so advertising didn't whip everyone into a spending frenzy — folks seemed to spend their energies more on doing good deeds and spreading holiday cheer. At least that's how it seemed from my child's perspective.

In North Beverly, where we lived, the only public decoration was a colorfully-lit Christmas tree on the traffic island between Daddy's Gulf gas station and the little variety store that my folks purchased in the mid-fifties. But at the gas station, my sister and I would take real pleasure in painting Christmas scenes on the plate glass windows each year. One year it would be a manger scene or shepherds gazing at the Star, the next year a Christmas Della Robbia wreath. It was always such fun to spend the day with Dad while we drew the design on the glass, remembering to reverse the picture since it would be seen from the other side, and to paint the design with all the different colors while Dad watched and nodded approval. He took visible pride in telling each visitor to the station that we were his daughters. We felt so important.

When we owned the store, which was named Keefe's Variety, we would daub pink Glass Wax designs all over the large windows using the manufacturer's specially designed holiday stencils of candles, wreaths, and ornaments. It seemed really neat to us because after Christmas, when you wiped the designs away, it washed the windows as well! Those stencils were actually pretty ugly, but we were young and didn't realize that, and Mom was just happy to have us participate in decorating the store. She would bring in garlands of holly and hang ornaments tastefully and play Christmas albums by Perry Como and Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby throughout the holiday season. No one ever complained.



We'd be open till noon on the day of Christmas Eve, and my Mom would spend much of that morning gift-wrapping presents for the customers who had last minute gift needs (at no extra charge, of course), right up until we closed. The boxes of Whitman's chocolates would fly off the shelves and be beautifully wrapped with the patterned paper that peeled off a giant roll in the back of the store. Mom would provide the ribbon. In those days, a lot of folks would give cartons of cigarettes for gifts, if you can imagine, and Mom would wrap those up, too — even though they already had a puffing, smiling Santa on the carton, edged in holly. Desperation gifts, like a canned ham or two pairs of stockings or a couple paperback books, would also be prettily wrapped and handed back to the customer with a smile and a "Merry Christmas!" from my mother.

My sister Linda and I were raised Roman Catholic, so the church connection to Christmas was very important to me as a child. On Sunday mornings at Saint Mary's Star of the Sea church, with my beloved father warm beside me on the cold pews, I would be awed by the droning Latin gibberish emanating from the front of the church and the beautiful music coming from the choir loft behind and above us. I'd believe myself to be in a holy state. The coming of the Baby Jesus, who would change the world forever, was a true miracle to me.

After Mass, Daddy would take us to Goodwin's variety store on the corner for a treat, and the festive decorations would make my eyes sparkle and my heart beat fast. I had no problem reconciling Advent's solemn anticipation of the birth of our Savior with my more secular anticipation of Santa Claus. The coming of Christ may be miraculous, but I was equally awed by the expectation of flying reindeer and a fat little man sliding down our chimney to deliver my presents!

Holidays in the fifties were very much a family affair. Uncles and aunts would travel great distances, if need be, to get together. Consequently, everywhere we went we'd find kisses, food, presents, and cousins. Growing up, I spent more time with my cousins at Christmas than at any other time since.

On Christmas Eve we'd go to Grammy and Grampa's house in Beverly. My maternal grandparents had emigrated from Denmark in the early 1900's and celebrated their holiday in the European tradition with an abundance of food, family, and festivity. Every room in their house would be decorated, and homemade treats abounded. Rich, sweet dates, stuffed with hand-cracked walnuts and rolled in confectionery sugar were placed on pressed glass dainty plates and set on end tables in the living room. Dark, crunchy ginger cookies, highly spiced and heavily scented, hung from red ribbons on the Christmas tree and on many cupboard knobs where we could easily sneak one away. Spritzers in the shape of S's and O's, butter cookies that Grammy always made for dessert, would literally melt in your mouth and were so short that they'd crumble at the slightest pressure. And how could I ever forget the special kringle that Grammy's sister, my Musta Anna, would send each Christmas from Racine, Wisconsin, with the marzipan pigs that were supposed to bring us luck in the coming year? Grammy would prepare



other Scandinavian delicacies that were so foreign to my young palate that I never learned what many of them actually were! My lack of interest in strange foods was absolute, but there

were never enough of the familiar holiday goodies that I loved so much.

December 24th was also Grammy and Grampa's wedding anniversary, so it was always a double celebration. Uncle Ralph and Aunt Reggie would drive up from Bridgeport with their three kids, and Uncle John and Aunt Alice and their three kids would manage to get to Massachusetts from wherever the Navy had them stationed at that point. Grampa's brother, my Great Uncle Barney, would trek over from Marblehead with his wife Mildred. They would always bring their newest fancy camera to blind us with flash bulbs and take pictures of us that we would never see! Uncle Barney would send the pictures to his other brothers in Brooklyn whom I never met, there being some sort of family feud that separated my own grandfather in some unhappy way from his other five siblings.

Grammy's house was always very warm at Christmas — remember that heating oil was cheap in the 1950's. The ladies all wore beautiful dresses with capped sleeves, sparkly jewelry, and high heels. The men would wear shined shoes with their suit, vest, and tie. By evening's end, the men would be in shirt sleeves, with a rosy glow on their cheeks not necessarily attributable to the warm rooms. The cousins all wore new Christmas duds — black velvet dresses with white lace collars for the girls and shirts with bow ties for the boys. The grownup dinner table would be set with the best china, glass, and silver and always looked rich and elegant. The younger cousins would sit at the children's table when the house was so full of family, all of them longing for the day when they could move up to the grownup table and oblivious to the fact that it would bore them to tears to be there! When dinner was over, there would be schnapps and cigars for the gentlemen, and then we'd all retire to the living room where Grammy would serve coffee, brandy for those who desired it, and cookies; and the grownups would drape themselves in the lovely furniture to visit and laugh some more. The cousins tried to consume as many cookies as possible and amused themselves as best they could, eager for the real Christmas to begin, that is, the presents.

When we were still young and gullible, all the children would eventually be sent downstairs to the finished basement to play. After a short while, we'd hear stomping upstairs, and jingle bells, and (I think) a hearty Ho, Ho, Ho. Soon after, one of the aunts or uncles would stand at the top of the cellar stairs and yell down for us to come up — Santa had left our presents! There would be a charge up the stairs, and we'd all sit at our own parents' feet and open the presents — usually including a special doll for the girls and trucks or planes for the boys. It was always a thrill and always a haul. Uncle Barney, now cheerful with brandy and cigars, would organize the family for pictures and flash us into oblivion. Still seeing the floating spots before our eyes, we would bundle up against the chilly winter outside, say our goodbyes, and toddle off to our home and our beds, in anticipation of MORE Christmas tomorrow. The others would linger on, sending the young ones off to share beds upstairs, and the grownups celebrating into the wee hours with more brandy and coffee.

Christmas mornings Lin and I would tiptoe down the stairs to see how many presents Santa had left for us under our tree. Such delight and relief when we saw them — we still feared coal in our stockings if we'd been bad recently! If we got downstairs before Mom and Daddy did, we were allowed to open our stocking gifts while we waited for their appearance. We could always count on an orange and a "Surprise Ball" (found only at Johnny Appleseed's store) in the toe of our stockings. They were outrageously expensive for what they were, and we thought Santa was very generous, indeed, to give us one. Mom would never waste the money...

I haven't seen anything like "Surprise Balls" since I was very young, but they were wonderful. Each was a grapefruit-sized sphere, fashioned of wrapped crepe paper to look like a clown face or a zoo animal or a cartoon character. You'd have to destroy the face to get at the surprises inside, but it would be worth it! When you ripped a starting point into the outer layer, you could start to unroll the ball slowly. As the paper started to trail onto the floor, tiny toys would be revealed. By the time you had a pile of crepe paper streamer on the floor, you'd have a dozen or so miniature treasures in your hand. To me, it was the best part of Christmas morning.

With approval from Mom and Dad, we'd tear into the larger presents. We had to hurry because we'd have to get ready for Mass soon afterwards. We were among the lucky ones in our group of our friends. Some really serious Catholics we knew had to go to Mass before they got to open their gifts.

Christmas afternoon we'd drive north to Wenham to have mid-afternoon dinner at Nana's, usually just with our maiden aunts, Neen and Peg, who also lived there with their parents. Sometimes Uncle Bern and Aunt Louise would be there from Cape Cod with their kids, David and Nancy, who were the same ages as Lin and me. On rare occasion, Uncle Phil and Aunt Alene, who were childless, would venture up from Virginia. And on very special occasions, Aunt Loretta would be there with Jane and Joan, her teen-aged twins who we loved very much because they seemed so sophisticated. We'd eat the traditional turkey and potatoes and vegetables, then move into the small living room to open our useful

presents (very like Dylan Thomas in "A Child's Christmas in Wales"): mittens, hats, scarves, slippers, etc. The Keefes were long on practicality and short on imagination.

The afternoon would drag on and, invariably it seemed, we'd be scolded for being too noisy or too rambunctious — couldn't we sit still like nice little young ladies? But it was boring listening to them talk about people whose names we didn't know doing grownup things we weren't interested in. The only game they had to play at Nana and Grampa's was Chinese checkers, and there were never enough marbles to play it right. It's sad to me that my memories of the Christmas gatherings at my paternal grandparents' house are all so joyless, as I loved them dearly. Nonetheless, the food was usually good and Nana always made divinity fudge as a special treat. That almost made up for the sullen aunts and the chilly atmosphere.

Relief would finally come after the sun had set. We would happily ride home to review and to play with all our new gifts before heading to bed for a well-earned rest. We were very fortunate children. In that Eisenhower time of plenty, we had plenty of Christmas!

— Karen Keefe Luxton



The mission of the **Association of MIT Retirees** is to provide opportunities for members to engage with the Institute and to develop programs and events that will be of both interest and fun. We strive to be an active component in the MIT family by keeping our members in touch with each other and with the Institute, and to forge new friendships.

Nancy Alusow and Jane Griffin are co-chairs of the Association. The organization is supported by Traci Swartz and Chris Ronsicki of the Community Services Office.

Please send your suggestions for activities to:

The Association of MIT Retirees
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Rm E19-432
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307
Tel: 617-253-7910
Email: retirees.assoc@mit.edu
Web: web.mit.edu/retireesassoc