

# A Century Of Memories & Yuletide Splendor Ring In The Season At The St. Louis Altenheim



By *Susanne Corbett*

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“I’m so glad we don’t have to have a bucket of water by the Christmas tree anymore,” recounted Altenheim resident Katherine Chambers when asked how Christmas has changed through the years. “Oh I remember

it well, all those Christmas candles were so pretty but so dangerous. We were so glad when electric tree lights came along. We didn’t have to worry about the candles catching the tree on fire anymore.”

**K**atherine was among a number of Altenheim residents who

recently shared personal memories of Christmas past of the last century. Regarding candles, Fred Bouchein, who’ll celebrate his 98th Christmas this year agrees with Katherine.

“**Y**es, our family always has a couple of buckets of water near the tree—but I don’t know why because they would never would light the candles,” said Fred. However, Fred did share an unusual safety step taken by his family for the tree.

“**T**o keep the tree fresher longer I recall the heat being shut off in the room where my folks put up the Christmas tree.” Being a retired plumber Fred noted that was the worst thing you can do to the water pipes in winter - to turn off the heat. “I don’t remember the pipes freezing. Anyway, it seemed like that room was locked for weeks. When we asked what was going on Mother would just say that Santa Claus was working in there.”

**F**lorence Deppe, another Altenheim resident for a number

*continued*

of years shared a similar memory of a special Christmas room.

“On Christmas Eve after my grandparents, aunts and uncles would arrive, my father would start playing ‘O Holy Night’ on the Victrola. Then, father would open the parlor doors to the most beautiful sight.” Florence recounted how breathtaking the Christmas tree was noting how it was covered in ornaments and lights. “In those days Christmas lights were the type that if one light burned out the whole strand of lights went dark.” When asked if the tree was real or artificial Florence exclaimed it was real. “You know you could get a great tree for a dollar in those days and a good tree for 50 cents.”

Unlike those ornate trees recounted by Katherine and Florence, Ella Weber remembers a simpler Christmas tree, and one that didn’t cost a dime. Ella’s childhood Christmas trees were cut from the woods near her families’ farm.

“Our was very different – not much decoration to speak of but we all thought it was pretty,” said Ella who remembered and made a special note of the animal shaped cookies that were baked and hung on the tree. “We all ate the cookies you know.” Ella will be celebrating her 101st Christmas this year.

“We had cookies and fruitcake too. But the

fruitcake wasn’t soaked in brandy or rum – we were Quakers,” said Barbara Graves. As far as traditions Barbara said, “Grandfather would read the Christmas story from the Bible, which was about all the religion we got on the holiday. But I do recall the tree and the greens and hanging our stockings and wonderful food.”

“We kids hung our stocking’s too,” said Katherine who went on to explain her family’s holiday ritual. “We kids were kept upstairs with my Grandmother waiting to be given the OK to come down to where the tree was. Santa Claus came, brought gifts under the tree and I had an orange in my stocking.”

Oranges seemed to be the

number one prized stocking treat for most of the Altenheim residents when they were children. Barbara related, “Santa brought us not just the regular orange, but the blood oranges.” Blood oranges have a dark ruby red flesh that is considered a gourmet delicacy still today.

But what about favorite toys received. “I got a sleigh one year and that Christmas it didn’t snow,” said Barbara. Katherine got a pair of skates and bemoaned this it did snow, which made the sidewalks unskateable.

Gifts and toys were not the predominate memories of the

Altenheim residents. Memories most vivid were those of decoration and trees, which is the reason the Altenheim staff gives particular attention to producing the home’s holiday displays.

Christmas trees and greenery will decorate the Altenheim’s Victorian vintage parlors and dining rooms. Each will have its own décor and color scheme. Visitors are welcomed to come and view the rooms and take time to visit with a few of the available residents. Or, perhaps partake in one of the Eggnog Socials, a favorite of the residents and staff.

“The Altenheim has been an active part of the community for over a hundred years and we’re delighted to invite the community in to view our rooms that reflect our Christmas heritage.” Said Kay Newell, Altenheim spokesperson.

While interviewing our special guests during our Altenheim visit we found that many residents had special Christmas memories to share. It was a reminder to take time and ask and record the memories of your elder friends and family. Memories that reflect a family’s or a community’s heritage that is a gift that can be opened each year with the retelling. Remember past Christmas’s of your own this holiday season. Write your memories down and pass them on this Christmas to a special friend or relative. It’s a gift that can be shared and cherished in Christmas’s yet to come.

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