

BRIGHT > AMERICAN ESSENCE

The Dreams of Children: Christmas During the Great Depression

Some children were happy just to have food for Christmas. Others dreamt about items illustrated in the Sears & Roebuck Christmas catalog.

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Iowa children eating potatoes, cabbage, and pie for Christmas dinner during the Depression, 1936. Library of Congress. Public Domain



By Jeff Minick

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A A Print

Oranges.

Search online for “Great Depression Christmas,” and you’ll find numerous histories and personal recollections of that holiday when the United States was in the depths of the **longest, ugliest financial downturn** in its history. As you browse these narratives, many written by people who lived through the economic disaster, or by their children, you’ll find a now ordinary fruit, the orange, mentioned time and again. Along with candy and nuts, an orange was the most common stocking gift given to children; it was a rare and costly treat in a household where the Christmas meal might consist of soup and homemade bread.

Some today may rightly feel moved to pity the reduced circumstances in which countless thousands of fathers and mothers battled to provide a Christmas for their children. Yet the background to their stories can rouse admiration and respect: The hard times of the 1930s produced creative ways to celebrate the winter holidays that continue to influence us today.

Appreciating the Basics

Before the stock market crash of 1929, the **unemployment rate** in the United States was a little more than 3 percent. During the Depression years, from 1929 to 1941, that rate soared, peaking at 25 percent in 1933 and remaining in the double digits until the United States entered World War II. Consequently, when the Yule season rolled around, struggling families had to make rather than buy Christmas gifts for their children.

For his 2008 **article** “Fruits of the Great Depression: Christmas Memories,” Damon Sims interviewed several elderly men and women who were children when the U.S. economy fell apart. Their

recollections of Christmastime were remarkably similar. Nearly all reported that their stockings usually held nuts, candy, and the ubiquitous oranges. Any other gifts they received were often preowned toys or, more commonly, handmade by a parent.

Richard Grondin, who grew up with eight siblings on a Michigan farm, remembered the delight with which he received a store-bought lunch bucket for Christmas. It was a novelty among his classmates in their one-room schoolhouse.

“Everybody was poor,” he told Sims. “Nobody had money. If you had food to eat and a place to sleep, you were thankful for that.”

Marie Calandra, 86, recalled the Cleveland stores of her childhood.

“We always went downtown to see Santa Claus and look at all the windows,” she said. “The displays were fantastic, wonderful.”

She was the daughter of a man who owned a shoe repair business. Her family window-shopped rather than bought from these establishments.

“We were lucky,” she told Sims. “We ate. We didn’t have that much, but we were never deprived.”



Christmas dinner in the home of Earl Pauley during the Depression, 1936. Many children felt fortunate just to have food on the table and a roof over their heads. Public Domain

Secondhand and Homemade

In her **sketch** “Christmas in the Depression 1936: We Had Each Other,” Reva Swanson described her father’s struggles to maintain his upholstery business and her parents’ joint efforts to give their children a Christmas with a tree and some gifts.

“There was a pair of skates for brother Bob, who was 13. Not new, but in very good condition,” she said. “A sled for Jack who was 4, and it had a shiny new coat of paint. There were dolls for all four girls. Amazing ... they looked like our old dolls but they had bright shiny clean faces and new dresses and little crocheted booties and even little pairs of underwear.”

Her mother had collected their dolls several days before Christmas. To the girls' delight, their mother had refurbished them.

“What a wonderful Christmas,” Swanson concluded. “We had food on the table, toys to play with, a roof over our heads, warm beds to sleep in, the love of our parents—and none of it came from the Sears catalog.”

Store-Bought



Cover for the 1937 Sears "Christmas Wishbook" and a letter to Santa. Internet Archive. Public Domain

The Sears catalog to which Swanson referred was likely the Sears Christmas Book. The company had begun their mail-order business almost 50 years earlier, but it was only in 1933 that Sears & Roebuck put out its first Christmas catalog. This annual inventory of gifts soon became an American icon known as the “**Wish Book**,” featuring goods

for adults and children, with scenes of Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and ornaments decorating the pages.

Merchandise for children in that first issue included a “Miss Pigtails” doll, Mickey Mouse watches, and Lionel electric trains. Besides clothing and bath accessories, adults could purchase treats such as chocolates, fruitcakes, and even canaries.

Top Off Your Holiday Dinner with Fruit Cake

5 Pounds Superfine Quality Fruit Cake FOR \$2.98
Our Finest Quality

5 Pounds Fine Quality Fruit Cake FOR \$1.98
FINE QUALITY

5 Pounds Good Quality Fruit Cake FOR \$1.00
GOOD QUALITY

5 Pounds Good Quality Assorted Chocolates 89¢
Less Than 12¢ Per Pound

Delicious Chocolates—In Gift Box

5 Pounds Good Quality Assorted Chocolates 89¢
Less Than 12¢ Per Pound

What a bargain! You wouldn't believe such tasty chocolates could be sold at so low a price. But here they are, so make it a real Merry Christmas this year, and let this big bargain in chocolates help you celebrate. You know they're wholesome, for only the finest ingredients are used in these chocolates. They're fresh, too—as fresh as if you made them yourself in your own kitchen. They'll please every taste, for here is a wide variety of fillings—flavor caramels, nut's tangy, crisp nut clusters, delicious fruit cream in several flavors. All coated in velvety smooth dark vanilla chocolate and light waxy chocolate. The amazing low price has affected neither the variety nor the quality; you'll be proud to offer this candy to your guests. Packed in 25¢ Christmas box. Shipping weight, 6 pounds.

8 V 7924 **5 Pounds** 89¢

10 Lbs. Candy \$1.49 and Fall

DE LUXE QUALITY \$1.79
 With 30 Christmas Bases
 Extra fine quality candy? Delicious as our low-golden brown peanut brittle, a tangy mixture of hard wax and bits of delicious chocolate drops and gum drops. A pure wholesome assortment. Not ill-timed. Ship. wt., 10 lbs.

8 V 7959
10 Lbs. Candy \$1.49 and Fall

DE LUXE QUALITY \$1.79
 With 30 Christmas Bases
 Extra fine quality candy? Delicious as our low-golden brown peanut brittle, a tangy mixture of hard wax and bits of delicious chocolate drops and gum drops. A pure wholesome assortment. Not ill-timed. Ship. wt., 10 lbs.

8 V 7960
10 Lbs. Candy \$1.79 and Fall

10 POUNDS TASTY ASSORTED HOLIDAY CANDIES
 PACKED IN 10-QUART GALVANIZED PAILS

ECONOMY QUALITY \$1.49
 Without Bases

DE LUXE QUALITY \$1.79
 With 30 Christmas Bases

FREE! 20 Boxes with our Deluxe Assortment

Christmas Stocking
 Chock Full of Candy, Nuts, Toys 49¢

What child wouldn't be overjoyed with a Christmas stocking like this! Toys, candy, nuts, marzipan, everything your child could wish for in a big Christmas stocking. All in one convenient with candy, too back with your own hands. A big stocking filled with delicious nuts, chocolate mouse wraps and 10 gold color foil and packed in gold color mesh bag. All of this shiny variety of candy and nuts make this stocking one of the more delightful gifts for a child. Crisp peanut and bear the stocking's inside when they find them on Christmas morn. Includes 10 gold color foil and packed with "Peanut" to assure your recipient is pleased and satisfied. Ship. wt., 4 lbs. 4 oz.

8 V 7931—All for only 49¢

60 PIECES FOR 55¢
 Here's Something Brand New!

Colorful marshmallow candy tree ornaments—and they're just so good to eat as they are attractive. They are sure to make a hit with everyone, especially the kiddies. Just hang them on the tree by their little paper loops and watch the children's eyes light up. Assortments consist of red and white, green and white, blue and white, and pink and white Santas, and 19 Santas in all. Ship. wt., 3 lbs. 5 oz.

7932—Sixty Pieces... 55¢

Do Luxe All Filled Hard Candy
 Our finest quality. Thin, crisp sugar shells in assorted flavors, colors and designs. Every piece filled with delicious jams, nut butters or cream. 1-lb. bag, 19¢ 5-lb. bag, \$1.49

8 V 7942 19¢ **8 V 7943** 49¢

Filled and Solid Holiday Candy
 A good quality and delicious mixture. Many flavors and colors. 2-lb. bag, 28¢ 5-lb. bag, 55¢

8 V 7928 28¢ **8 V 7930** 55¢

Holiday All Hard Candy
 Fruit flavored, firm and wholesome. 3-lb. bag, 39¢ 5-lb. bag, 59¢

8 V 7927 39¢ **8 V 7929** 59¢

Two Gifts in One
5 LBS. CANDY \$1.59
 In 4-Quart Aluminum Kettle

You can't imagine such a delicious assortment of hard candy in so many flavors, and brilliant colors! Raspberry, red, pink, yellow etc. all packed in a quality 4-quart, polished aluminum kettle with "clam-shell" strainer style cover that has many uses when the last piece is eaten. Be sure you have plenty of candy for Christmas. Ship. wt., 7 lbs.

8 V 8101—5 lbs. \$1.59 Candy and Kettle

Buttercups for Christmas!
 Surprise the kiddies! Include some in their Christmas stockings. These pure wholesome buttercups in their Christmas stockings will be loved with the many other shapes, such as Santa Claus, Christmas trees, water balloons, dolls, etc. All in a large variety of flavors and pleasing colors. Makes a real treat for the kiddies. Shipping weight, 3 lbs. and 3 lbs. 10 oz.

8 V 7916 **8 V 7917**
1-lb. Bag 19¢ **2 Lb. Bag** 37¢

Empty Christmas Boxes!
 Gay-colored one-half pound size holding boxes with tape handles. Simply fill them with delicious candy from any of our assortments. Perfect for use hanging on Christmas trees. Ship. wt., 12, 8 and 50, 1 lb. 6 oz., 100, 3 lbs. 11 oz.

8 V 8523—12 Boxes 10¢
8 V 8525—37¢
8 V 8524—67¢

100 Boxes 67¢

SEARS ✓ PAGE 103

Fruit cake and candies advertised in the 1937 Sears "Christmas Wishbook." Internet Archive. Public Domain

The existence of such a catalog and numerous descriptions of window displays in the stores of towns and cities around the country reveal that many Americans could afford a store-bought Christmas. The low prices for these goods matched the fallen economy, and innovative manufacturers created and offered affordable seasonal decorations to prospective customers.

Inexpensive foil icicles and garlands for Christmas trees, for instance, rose in popularity during this decade. Cardboard **Putz houses**, toy

buildings that originated in Germany, were used to create miniature villages beneath the Christmas tree. Working in conjunction with Corning Glass, in 1937 Max Eckardt began mass-producing **Shiny Brite** ornaments for use as tree decorations, which became incredibly popular. Richard Drew's 1930 invention of **scotch tape** was an instant hit for gift wrapping presents. In 1930, Coca-Cola's Santa Claus appeared in ads in the Saturday Evening Post and other outlets, and that **image** became the St. Nick standard still used today: a plump, white-bearded, pleasant old man in a red suit.

NEW AMERICAN-MADE UNBREAKABLE ORNAMENTS

At Last! Glittering Beauty
... Combined With Durability
New, light, most unbreakable! New popular style balls, balls, cones, etc. Many with fancy decorations. Covered with particles of glass finest. Colors—**12 Beautiful!** ... **12 Popular Size!** ... **12 Popular Size!** ... **12 Popular Size!**

29c ... **59c**

49 V 6615 ... **49 V 6616**

12 Jumbo Size Hand Painted
Size from 2 1/2 in. to 3 1/2 in. ... **69c**
49 V 6612—Box of 12, 69c

12 New Shapes For Kiddies' Joy
Average size, 4 in. ... **59c**
49 V 6611—Box of 12, 59c

12 Large Size 2 Pink Dot Balls
Average size, 2 1/2 inches. ... **49c**
49 V 6610—Box of 12, 49c

22-Piece Outfit A Real Bargain!
Average size, 1 1/2 in. in diameter. ... **49c**
49 V 6641 ... 49c

12 Beauties Popular Size
Average size, 1 1/2 in. ... **39c**
49 V 6607 ... 39c

12 Winners For Small Tree
Average size, 1 1/2 in. ... **25c**
49 V 6608 ... 25c

Santa Claus Outfit
Cotton Flannel ... **\$2.98**
49 V 6618 ... \$2.98

Santa Claus Cloth Mask
Big Value! ... **49c**
49 V 6697 ... 49c

6 Bright Birds
All blue trimmed trees are becoming more popular every year. ... **29c**
49 V 6643 ... 29c

12 All-Blue Balls
All blue trimmed trees are becoming more popular every year. ... **29c**
49 V 6688—12 for 27c

17 Unbreakable Blinkers
Sears de luxe. More beautiful and popular than ever. ... **29c**
49 V 6527—17 Blinkers, 29c

36 Icicles
Long. Silver brand, give jeweled effect. ... **27c**
49 V 6511 ... 27c

16 Metal Icicles
"Diamond" brand, give jeweled effect. ... **19c**
49 V 6512 ... 19c

Sears Fireproof Tin Foil Icicles
Colored or Silver Extra Long Strands
Beautiful wavy effect. ... **10c**
49 V 6508—Box, 10c

Silver Color
Assorted Colors
8c
49 V 6509—Box, 8c

New! Unbreakable 12 Foil Ornaments
Brand New! Highest quality. ... **39c**
49 V 6620 ... 39c

TINSEL GARLANDS SILVER PLATED BARGAIN PRICE!
Brighten your tree with Sears De Luxe rich foil Garland made to our specifications. ... **21c**
49 V 6574 ... 21c

18-In. ... 21c

Famous Religious Sets of 12 Composition Figures
Best quality the world over. ... **98c**
49 V 6580 ... 98c

15-Pc. Composition Religious Crib Set
Colored from ... **89c**
49 V 6574 ... 89c

48 3 1/2-Inch Candles
Odorous. ... **19c**
49 V 6591 ... 19c

12 Holders
(See Insert) Ball socket. ... **23c**
49 V 6577 ... 23c

14 Inches High White Table Tree and 3 Ornaments
Rich, silver white branches on this artificial tree. ... **49c**
49 V 6644—Complete, 49c

8-House Christmas Village
Snow effect, roof. ... **59c**
49 V 6636—Complete, 59c

250 Hangers
Easy way to attach ornaments. ... **10c**
49 V 6544 ... 10c

CHRISTMAS TREES
Finest Quality! American Made
American, Yet Lifetime. ... **23c**
49 V 6620 ... 23c

Tree Number	Height	Length	Branches	Shape	Price Each
49 V 6620	13 in.	11 in.	11	1 1/2 in.	\$0.33
49 V 6621	16 in.	14 in.	15	2 in.	\$0.40
49 V 6622	19 in.	17 in.	19	2 1/2 in.	\$0.47
49 V 6623	24 in.	21 in.	24	3 in.	\$0.54
49 V 6624	28 in.	25 in.	28	3 1/2 in.	\$0.61
49 V 6625	36 in.	32 in.	36	4 in.	\$0.75

Electric Tree Stand
Use a Lifetime
\$2.79
49 V 6546—For trees up to 2 1/2 in. diameter. ... **\$2.79**

Tree Stands—Water Pan New Design! 2 Sizes
All steel, green enamel. ... **\$2.79**
49 V 6547—For trees up to 2 1/2 in. diameter. ... **\$2.79**
49 V 6548—For trees up to 2 1/2 in. diameter. ... **\$2.79**

Advertisements for affordable Christmas tree decorations: foil icicles, cardboard villages, and glass ornaments in the 1937 Sears "Christmas Wishbook." Internet Archive. Public Domain

Family, Friends, and Community

A frequent theme in personal accounts of a Great Depression Christmas is the importance of familial and social ties. These bonds

existed before 1929, but with the tidal wave of unemployment and its companions, uncertainty and fear, these relationships became even more important.



Unemployed workers in front of a shack with a Christmas tree gather around a trashcan fire on East 12th Street, New York City, 1938. Library of Congress. Public Domain

In Janie McKinley’s **story** from the Blue Ridge Mountains, we meet Granny, who when younger had fretted during the Depression years about whether members of her extended family would enjoy a good Christmas. Granny’s efforts to ensure everyone left the holiday table well-fed show her unflagging allegiance to relatives outside her own household.

“With foil icicles, dime-store gifts, and her seasonal dinner, Granny shared what was available during the Great Depression. And her caring efforts helped to make Christmas merrier during hard times,” McKinley said.

From Canada came the **story** “90 Years Ago, I Was Touched by a Random Act of Kindness That Defined the Christmas Spirit.” Here, Elsie Balint travels back to the Depression, when she was 6 years old and her family was struggling to make ends meet. Her parents explained to her there would be no presents that year, with the exception of some candy and an orange, a condition she readily accepted. However, she yearned for a Christmas tree decorated like the one in a local hardware store window. Walking home every day after school, Balint would pause to admire the beautiful tree.

On Christmas Eve, the owner of the hardware store showed up at Balint’s house with the fully decorated tree and told the family that they might enjoy keeping it over the holidays.

“We thanked him and wished him a very Merry Christmas,” she said. “After he left, I sat on the floor in front of my tree. I touched the prickly needles and smooth bulbs. My heart was bursting with joy to think that this tree was ours.”



A construction workman's one-room apartment during the Depression with a modest Christmas tree featuring foil icicles and Shiny Brite ornaments. Library of Congress. Public Domain

Fast Forward to the Present

One obvious reason to reflect on the past is to absorb any lessons it has to teach us.

The case of Christmas during the Great Depression offers several takeaways. We learn of men, women, and children who possessed the grit, creativity, and good sense to make do for themselves during hard times. Certainly, not all faced poverty with bright hearts, but in all these reminiscences, no one comes across embittered by the poverty they faced, nor do they seem envious of others. Those kids bent over their Sears Wish Books were enchanted, not green with envy.

Moreover, and more importantly, these children of the 1930s appear grateful for the gifts that came their way, however small or insignificant by today's standards. A solitary orange might have been the gift of the season, but they recall Christmas as a time of joy and family, sacrifice and love.

In speaking with Damon Sims, 84-year-old Janet Hirz shared her own lesson from her Depression Christmases: "Things don't make you happy."

Unspoken were these words: People do.

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Jeff Minick

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Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two

works of nonfiction, “Learning As I Go” and “Movies Make The Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va.

Author’s Selected Articles

Epoch Booklist: Recommended Reading for Dec. 20–26

Dec 19, 2024



Ex Libris: The Wright Brothers

Dec 18, 2024



A Tale of Two Eulogies: George Washington’s and Our Own

Dec 13, 2024



Ex Libris: James Madison

Dec 13, 2024



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