

A Winter's Tall Tales

By:

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In the style of Paul Bunyan a Christmas family reunion ends up as series of my story is better then yours. With father, grand father, and great grand father telling stories of their youth to impress and astound the rest of the family.

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I Tim and this Christmas unlike others we are celebrating my parents fiftieth wedding anniversary. Twice as many people came then originally planned. In addition to my brother's and sister's families there were aunts, uncles, cousins, grand parents, and my great grand father. So it was quite a sight to see. After eating we all went to the basement hand out gifts for my parents. Then the stories started to get out of hand.

My father and aunt May said how much things had changed since they were children. They told of how they had to get up early on cold winter mornings to shovel the mile long walkway to the road then walked 10 miles to school in hip deep snow and all up hill.

My mother's story was about having to walk up hill in freezing rain in order to get to school only to find the school door closed and she couldn't open it. There she stood till she froze and then someone finally let her in.

Uncle Bob's was about a Christmas party where there was no Christmas tree. So he and a friend went out looking for one. Since it was late on Christmas Eve all the lots were either sold out or closed. While driving around they saw a tree standing alone in a field. They hopped out of the truck, grabbed the chain saw, cut it down, put it in the back of the truck and headed back home. They no sooner got back to the house when the police drove up and arrested them both for destruction of private property. Apparently the tree they cut down was on the Mayor's front yard.

My grand father told of his winter tale where he saved the town he lived in. There was a hushed silence from everyone. No one had heard that story before not even my dad. After a moment my grand father smiled and started his story.

"It all happened when I was a young man during a terrible snow and ice storm. This was long before snow plows and other road clearing equipment. Everyone used what ever shovels and animals they had in order to help their neighbours.

During this storm the town only enough food and wood for a few days. It would take people from the nearby town almost a week to get to them. What were they going to do?" People asked themselves.

Grand father paused for a moment before he continued. Everyone was listening intently even the small fidgety children to my grand father's story. No one said a word.

"In my younger days," my grand father continued, "I was quite an athlete and did all kinds of sports. He ran races, paddled canoes, and rode bicycles over great distances."

"The snow was up to my waist with ice underneath. There was no path over to the barn where the animals were. The shovel was not going to dig through the snow fast enough. So, I took one of my canoe paddles and made large fast stroking motions and quickly cleared a path to the barn.

In the barn the animals were cozy with food and water for a couple days. While I was there I found an old pair of skates and skis. Strapping the skis and canoe paddle to my back I put on

the skates, grabbed a big push broom for cleaning the barn floor and headed back to the house. I skated on the ice that was under the cleared snow I made earlier with the paddle. I now swept it clear of snow with the broom all the way back to the house.

Once at the house I took off the skates, put on the skis, tied the broom to my back along with the paddle and put the skates over his shoulders. Then off I went to my neighbours farm to do the same thing. I did this with farm after farm until I got into town.

In town several of the storeowners were not able to get home and stayed in their stores. They were still trying to dig their way out of their stores to the street when I came by. I went to the first store on the main street. Took off my skis and grabbed my paddle. Then I went down the main street paddling a wide walkway for all to get through. At the other end of the street I put on the skates and grabbed the broom from off my back and swept a clean path while I skated back to the store. The storeowners were then able to get out of their stores to the walkway I had cleared.

I repeated this for the town hall and railway station. Soon the town had walkways to all the buildings. Everyone was happy. The town was saved or was it. People could walk around the town, but they couldn't get to the next town where they had more supplies.

The only clear way out of town was by the railway or the river. There was little snow on the tracks, but they were icy. This made the tracks slippery and dangerous for trains. The river on the other hand was a thick sheet of ice with no snow, but strong winds.

I decided the best way to get to the next town was to put on my skates and take the river route to the next town. So off I went with the paddle and broom tied to my back. I took these just in case the next town needed to be cleared as well. I used an opened umbrella as a ship's sail to catch the wind to blow me down river.

I was gone for the rest of the day and that night. The towns' folk were beginning to worry about me. They thought I might have gotten lost or frozen or attacked by wolves.

Early next morning just after sunrise the train whistle could be heard and its chimney smoke could be seen. As the train got closer to town the towns' people were amazed to see the train blowing fire in front of it. No, the train wasn't on fire. It was me sitting out front on the cow catcher with burning hot coals in a great iron box in front of it with me pumping a fire place bellows in order to blow the heat of the coals over the tracks and melting the ice.

When the train pulled into town it had fresh provisions for all. The mayor's of both towns gave me hero medals for saving the town. Then the railway gave me a reward for getting their train through by thawing out the tracks. That's how I saved the town," concluded my grandfather.

Everyone was totally amazed at this story. Saying, "Wow." "What a story." "You saved a whole town?" My grandmother just sat there and smiled. I think she had heard this one before.

My great grand father just sat there nodding his head. Then he said, "That's not quite how I remembered it, but close."

Then my great grand father started his own story. This was the most amazing story of all. Everyone was eager to hear what he had to say. My great grand father didn't talk much, but when he did everyone listened. The wind had picked up from an opened window and made his tale even more amazing.

"When I was a young man." He began in a low deep but clear voice. "Before I had children I was still living over in England and staying with a university friend. We decided to walk down the road to the village inn for a meal. It was the day before Christmas and it was a time to celebrate as well.

Usually my friend would eat at the house but since he had a guest we decided to go out and eat. It was a cold winter evening and it was only a couple miles to the inn. We thought we had dressed warmly before leaving the house. We were wrong, very wrong.

Shortly after leaving the wind picked up and the snow began to blow. Walking became more and more difficult. We thought about turning back. Then decided not to, believing that we were more than half way to the inn. We were not. With the strong cold wind and blinding snow it slowed us down even more. It was taking us longer to get there and the weather was getting worse.

Just then we heard a faint voice calling out. As we continued on the voice became louder. Soon we found an old man who had run off the road and his sleigh had turned over in the ditch. We helped him up, turned over the sleigh and helped him repack it.

This man then offered us a ride into town. Which, we gladly accepted. When we got to the inn we said good-bye to the man and each thanked the other for helping the other.

Then we decided that since the weather had changed for the worse that we should stay the night at the inn. Fortunately, a room was available and we took it. While we ate our meal we talked about our adventure getting to the inn and how we almost didn't.

It was then that we started remembering things about the old man whom we helped and then drove us into town. We noticed he had a large bag with wooden toys that he said he was bringing to his grand children. He had a big white beard and jolly laugh. The laugh wasn't so much as a "ha ha" laugh, rather a deeper "ho ho" laugh. The strangest thing was that he had two reindeer, not horses, drawing his sleigh.

We didn't think much more of the jolly old man with a reindeer sleigh until after we got back to house the next day. Once we were inside we soon noticed that the house was different. Someone had been there the night before. We each found a small-carved wooden toy for each of us. I got a soldier and my friend a horse.

We both looked at each other with puzzled looks on their faces. "No, it couldn't be we each said." Then as we turned around we saw that a stocking was hung over the fireplace with nuts and a candy stick in them. One for each of us.

"How'd these toys and stockings get here? We both wondered. The doors and windows were locked and there was no other way of getting into the house. We both paused and stared at

the fireplace. Then both shook our heads and said, "No. It could be. There was no way that old man could get into the house by way of the chimney and leave us both these gifts."

We decided that the door must have been left unlocked. A neighbour had come by and left these gifts for us. Later that day my friend and I talked with his neighbours. They knew nothing of the toys or stockings. Everyone who heard the story at first thought the two of us were crazy, but then left it as one of the miracles of the Christmas season.

After that I moved away and didn't see or hear from my university friend for many years. In the mean time both of us got married and started families. We tried to keep in touch but the letters grew fewer as the years passed.

After several years a letter arrived from my old friend saying that he had some bad times and was thinking about the past and the adventure we both had that winter so long ago with the old man and the toys. While thinking about this time my friend had written about their adventure and thought I would like to see what he had written.

I thought it was great story. I sent a letter thanking him for it and would treasure it always. It was not until many years later that I heard that after my friend had died that his daughter had the story published. Since then it has been told and retold and is known today as "The Night Before Christmas." With that my great grandfather sat quietly back in his chair and smiled.

No one could believe what they heard. His son, my grand father, no one could. Then my great grand father reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out an old envelope and opened it. The basement was silent once more. Even the wind outside had stopped.

My great grand father pulled two cracked, ripped, and faded pieces of paper out of the envelope. He then handed them to my dad, who was sitting beside him, with a shaking hand. Then said nothing.

The first piece of paper was addressed to my great grand father telling him about why he hadn't written in such a long time. It mentioned their winter adventure many years ago and that he wrote about it on the other piece of paper. My father carefully separated the two pages and looked at the page. He looked at it, blinked and looked at my great grand father. Who nodded and waved his hand in a manner of continue. From the paper my father said that this page was poem about getting lost in a snowstorm and a recipe for reindeer stew.

Then my great grand father started to laugh. It then spread to my dad, my aunts, uncles, and grand parents. The other children thought it was absolutely hilarious and we were all laughing for several minutes. However during the laughing I noticed my great grand father's laugh wasn't so much a "ha ha" laugh but rather a deep rich "ho ho" laugh.