

# A childhood Christmas on the WWII homefront

By SALLY D. KETCHUM  
Special to the Record-Eagle

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." — Charles Dickens

While writing — and remembering — Christmas of 1943 on Detroit's east side, it is ironic that the streets had British names like Balfour, Chatsworth, Berkshire, etc. while the families that lived on them were of many nationalities. My family and friends lived on Devonshire. Our three families, close because their daughters were inseparable friends, were the Mullins, the Widmanns and the DeBolts — my family, which was Father, brother Dick, Mother and me.

Lou Mullins, tall and taciturn, worked for an insurance company and his beautiful wife, Viola, was soft, friendly and seemingly mysterious. They adopted Patty, a skinny child whose childhood was marked by forced eating which didn't work.

The Widmanns were a German-American family — the parents were born in Germany, the children in America. Good Americans, they were never ostracized, but rather embraced, and they joined everyone's war efforts against the Nazis and others in the Axis.

Adolph Widmann was a draftsman. His wife, Ilse, was one of the most beautiful women I've ever known. The Widmanns were dark Germans, but Ilse had clear and pale blue eyes that sparkled. The Widmanns' daughters were Monica, called Moni (pronounced Moany), Jutta (Yutta) and Marion (a rolled "r"). The entire family was talented in the arts.

My father, an advertising executive, worked on civilian defense projects. My brother worked at a grocery store after school and my mother, like others on Devonshire, was a housewife involved in home front war efforts.

The war pervaded many aspects

of family life. Children saved pennies to buy stamps to put into small books, which, in turn, purchased war bonds at schools. Schools provided Weekly Readers to students, some with news of international events. Posters covered walls at school promoting War Bond rallies — of which my dad drew several after being volunteered by me. Children were given order blanks to choose seeds — a penny a packet — for Victory Gardens.

Hands were always busy. Two nights a week, mothers met to fold bandages for the Red Cross. Khaki wool was provided for women to knit socks and hats for soldiers. Ilse Widmann knit continental style — which is much faster than American style — and turned out socks and mittens at a phenomenal rate.

Christmas began seriously with Advent, we girls attending not only catechism, but also Advent services, lighting a new candle each Sunday at our beautiful church, Peace Lutheran. I clearly remember walking home from church with Jutta along Warren Avenue. The streetlights lit up the dark early evening and we could look up into the swirling snow and wonderful flakes fell on our faces. I remember the mixed feelings of holiness and the excitement of the Christmas celebration — the tree, the parties and the incredible longing for gifts — as only children can feel.

We children awakened early to race to the tree, shouting to wake up parents and tearing the wrappings off our presents. The gifts of 1943 were modest, sometimes delayed and sometimes imperfect, but they were appreciated just the same.

Children sometimes waited three years for ice skates, getting only a book instead, being thrilled with an orange or two in their stockings. They would get the requested gym shoes knowing that the soles were cheap — real rubber going to the war effort. I got a dollhouse that was made of fiberboard, not wood.

A Christmas highlight was opening presents from my Aunt Ruth, who was an eccentric and joyful character. Ruth was my mother's elder sister. I loved her fiercely.

She was part clown, trickster, Samaritan and Santa Claus. I thought her nearly magical. She sent skis to us, though we were city-bound. She sent an exotic keg of stuffed dates in a syrupy liqueur and once, a silk taffeta quilt for me to play with.

But for all her frivolity, Aunt Ruth was a true patriot. Her élan vital during the war shined most brightly in her openhearted generosity to European immigrants fleeing Nazi occupation. Living near New York, Ruth met these poor people off the ships and was liaison to their sponsors or relatives far from the East coast.

An anecdote that shows not only Ruth's service, but also her magnificent humor and spirit, is when she once she met a refugee who looked tired, worn and poverty-stricken. The woman said she didn't even own a nightgown. Ruth to the rescue: My aunt hailed a cab and took the woman, a once affluent German, to Saks Fifth Avenue's sleepwear department, where the refugee selected a \$125 nightgown — a fortune then. Aunt Ruth paid without a bat of an eyelash.

We children drew names of war-torn families in school. The slip I pulled bore the name of a family in Thessalonica, Greece. My mother made it a priority to fill a box monthly to send them, despite much of what they needed was rationed stateside and mail restrictions were enormous. Shipping was dangerous and haphazard, so boxes to Europe had to be wrapped in muslin or fabric and sewn shut.

Weeks after one Christmas, we received a return box. The women of the Greek family had turned the muslin into pillowcases and detailed them with exquisite needle-worked lace. The irony of the rough fabric and fine gentle lace was a symbol that while the war raged, the spirit of survival and love of mankind remained steady and strong.

Shortages were universal on the American homefront; metal, gasoline, coffee, chocolate, butter, sugar and more were rationed or nearly impossible to obtain. Some shortages were strange — a shortage of bubble gum which nearly every child keenly felt.

I received a small toy horn in 1943. It was made of a remarkable material new to me — plastic. All metal went to the war effort. The horn was red, white and blue. The horn graces our tree this year, treasured and prominently displayed.

After the Mullins, the Widmanns and the DeBolts opened family presents, breakfasted and dressed, the neighborhood go-around began. All three families met at each home to examine gifts, eat and drink, and sing carols while Moni, an accomplished pianist, accompanied them.

The food at each home was simple, soda or milk for the children, highballs or eggnog for the adults. Christmas cookies were everywhere. The women saved rationing coupons for months to obtain the butter for those cookies. Ilse Widmann was a Christmas cookie artist and while several of us still have her recipe for Moravian Ginger Thins, no one has ever been able to duplicate the potato-chip thinness and crispness of Ilse's cookies.

After these parties, we returned home, caught our breath and drove through the snow-covered, slippery streets to my grandfather Richard's and my uncle George's house, a widower and bachelor, respectively.

My grandfather was born in Germany, arriving in America at age 17. As I recall, he was quiet about the war. However, I can see him still, sitting by the ornate iron stove, reading the war news in the German language newspaper with grim expression. He always had a little Christmas tree, usually a branch he picked up somewhere. I was fascinated by its ugliness, not understanding his wartime frugality. He decorated it with bits of saved foil, cigar bands and bottle caps. Now I understand its beauty.

My uncle was a natural cook. I loved the pickles and olives, although I can recall every item of his other large dinners. After my mother did the dishes, we listened to Christmas stories or carols sung by Detroit choirs on the radio.

At the visit's end, my brother and I, eager to get home to our own tree and gifts, piled into the back



Photo courtesy of author Sally D. Ketchum as a child in her Christmas party dress during WWII posing with the American flag. Even the dress was patriotic, with trim in red, white and blue.

of the old 1937 DeSoto and hunkered down in the back seat for warmth.

I looked out at the brightly lit windows of homes as we drove by and played a counting game. I counted the gold and red star decals in those windows to pass time. As I recall, a gold star meant that family had lost a son or father in the war, the red star that a family member was in the service. More than one window had two or more stars.

But the impact of such tragic symbols was far from an American child's mind at Christmas 1943.

I was happy then for many reasons: because my dad was with us, because the neighbors — young and old — celebrated together, because I was full of pickles and cookies, because it was Christmas and because America was the best place to live in the world.

It still is. Sally D. Ketchum is a local freelance writer.

## Short shopping season means more deals for consumers, competition for retailers

By DANA GEORGE  
Special to the Record-Eagle

Traditionally, the holiday shopping season begins the day after Thanksgiving and ends on Christmas Eve. Depending on the date Thanksgiving falls on, the number of shopping days can range from 26 to 32. Retailers, of course, love it when there are 32 days to shop.

This year there were only 26 days between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The short selling season leads experts to believe that businesses may be more aggressive this year. Add to that the fact that customer spending is down, competition is up and retailers could be sweating potential profits.

According to Purdue University, the last good year for holiday shopping was in 1992, when there was a 9.2 percent increase in sales from the previous year.

In 2001, it was 3 percent. In spite of national statistics, Traverse City area retailers are hoping for the best.

"As far as we're going, we had a great October," said Jennifer Lambert, manager of J. C. Penney in Traverse City. "November started a little slow, but last week really busted loose. I think people realized how close we are to December and how little shopping time is left. Last Saturday (before Thanksgiving) was bigger for us than the day after Thanksgiving normally is."

Lambert is anticipating a "very strong holiday season," and that the store is packed with merchandise and ready for customers.

"I think competition is good for the consumer," she said. "And competition is good for retailers. It keeps us on our toes."

Rick Mavis, owner of Traverse City's Lemstone Books, is also anticipating a strong retail season. Holiday sales provide 25 percent of the store's annual income. He doesn't see the shortened shopping season as a threat.

"I don't think it makes any difference," Mavis said. "We were quite pleased with sales last year and are optimistic about this year. Santa Claus is down at our wing of the mall this year, too. That will bring a lot of people down here and we have many products for young families."

Laurie Loomis owns Raven's Child and Wings, both Traverse City clothing stores. Loomis gets a kick out of helping customers find just the right gift.

"I'm not much of a salesman, but I'm a pretty good finder," Loomis said.

Over the years, she's noticed

a few trends regarding holiday shopping habits.

"You have your early shoppers. Then you have late shoppers who are like that country song, 'The girls all look prettier at closing time,'" Loomis said with a laugh. "They like to buy things when the lights are flickering at the end of day on Christmas Eve."

Sales were down a bit last year, but not nearly as much as Loomis expected after Sept. 11. In addition, Raven's Child and Wings moved that November, to the 200 block of Front Street.

"We've been really lucky thanks to the people who remembered us," Loomis said. "If the rest of this year is any indication, sales should be strong this holiday season."

Alison Knowles, owner of Cali's Cottons Boutique in Traverse City, said that while she listens to national sales forecasts, she doesn't depend on them.

"You can't go by national forecasts in our area," said Knowles. "We have great local customers and wonderful tourists. We're a micro-climate unto ourselves here."

Traverse City may be an anomaly in an otherwise bleak shopping environment. According to Associated Press reports, earnings are down this quarter for Gap Stores, Target, Kohl's and Sears. But what's bad for the stores may be good for consumers.

"There are lots of mid-week and weekend promotions going on. There are lots of good deals out there for consumers," Lambert said. "Customers should be sure to look for the promotions."

Dana George is a local freelance writer.

## Christmas Memories

"In 1964, the Hardy family, had taken our annual Christmas trip from Traverse City to Birmingham, MI where my grandparents lived. Every year, we would pile three kids, one dog, two parents and what seemed like hundreds of presents into our Vista Cruiser station wagon and head south. One year, we had several gifts that were actually shipped earlier. One of those was huge — and mine — a Johnny Reb Cannon that actually shot spring-loaded cannon balls about the size of a tennis ball. My brother, Kent, got a very complete set of cardboard building blocks that, when assembled, actually could build a small fort about 4-5 feet high. By mid-morning, I had convinced him to build a fort and then hide in it while my sister Liz and I assaulted his fortress with a steady barrage of Johnny Reb Cannon fodder. It took the better part of 30 minutes, but we finally zeroed in on his position and demolished both his fort, two light bulbs and a glass vase. No one was hurt but the cannon was confiscated and the light bulbs replaced. I don't think I ever saw the Cannon again but the fort blocks remain today."

Scott Hardy, TC city commission

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