

Looking Back - Christmas in the 1930s

Winsome Phillis (nee Voysey)

The following article was written by Winsome in December 1985 when her daughter Rosemary asked her to write her a story instead of buying a present for Christmas.

Every year, early in December my sister Elaine and I would have a day in Sydney with Auntie Evelyn and Auntie Hazel. We would catch the steam train that left Riverstone around seven o'clock in the morning, arriving in Sydney around half past eight. Anthony Horderns, Farmers and Grace Bros always had marvellous Christmas displays for children - as well as decorated windows to their stores. An entire section would be made into a fairy wonderland with maybe a walk through passage, or a fairy ride in a coach or train, ending up with Santa in his Magic Palace. After you told Santa what you would like for Christmas you were given a little gift.

These stores often had a pantomime too. The first one I can remember was I think at Farmers. It was an underwater play, with these tiny children as mermaids in shells, and the whole thing was seen through a green curtain which gave it a very realistic effect. I was absolutely fascinated.

Lunch was in one of the stores restaurants, which were beautifully decorated with plants. Farmers restaurant was on the top floor, and you could go out into the roof garden.

After school had finished for the year with its concert and prize giving, and after the Sunday School prize giving was held, seemed to be the beginning of the Christmas season for us. The house would be decorated with paper chains and bells, and each day we would eagerly await the arrival of the postman to see if any Christmas cards came for us.

Elaine and I shared a bedroom at home, and each Christmas Eve we would hang up a pillowcase at the end of our beds. Very early on the morning of Christmas Day we would wake up and crawl down to the end of the bed to see what was in the pillowcases - sometimes we just had to feel the contents, then wait impatiently until it was light enough to see. Then about half past six we would tear down to visit Lal and Uncle Charlie, who always went to visit Auntie Polly, Uncle Charlie Fry and their family at Waverley on the seven o'clock train on Christmas Day. Lal and Uncle Charlie always gave us lovely presents. My kookaburra brooches and my celluloid dressing table set came from them.



Home then 4 Regent Street, later renumbered to 8. Stella Rumery and her nieces Elaine and Gwen in the late 1920s/early 1930s.

Photo: Winsome Phillis

Each year our pillowcases would contain a book, as well as other gifts. For many years I would find a 'Tiny Tot's Annual' full of fairy stories and pictures. Then, in later years I would look forward to the Mary Grant Bruce books, especially the Billabong series. I can still remember sitting in the cool of the hall reading my book when I should have been doing something to help get dinner ready. Elaine would also get a book and often we would get a similar present such as a doll or a tea set in different colours. 'Puck' and 'Sunbeam' were two of the Annuals the others would get. I can't remember the third one.

We didn't have a Christmas tree to decorate in those days, they came along after the war.

Dinner was at midday in the dining room instead of the kitchen where we ate most of our meals. The wooden dining room table could be extended by adding leaves in the middle to accommodate about twelve people. It was always a hot roast dinner, chicken and vegetables, followed by plum pudding and custard. The chickens were in those days bought live from somewhere. Dad had to cut their heads off out in the woodheap and then they were plucked and cleaned using boiling water. I always avoided being around when this was going on, but I didn't mind eating them when Mum served them up stuffed and cooked at Christmas.

Mum also made the Christmas pudding, which contained silver trinkets and threepences, wrapped in little bits of greaseproof paper so that no one would eat one by mistake. These puddings (she always made two, one for New Year) were mixed in a large china wash bowl about six months earlier, and then hung in their calico wrapping on the back verandah till the day, then boiled again for some hours. They were delicious hot, and also delicious eaten cold with butter.

Christmas tea was a cold meal, with ham that had been previously cooked in the wood copper; lettuce and tomatoes from the garden - ours or Uncle Charlie's, and stewed peaches from our own trees.

At some time during the day we would take our presents around to show Mrs Crowle and her old mother, Mrs Wilson, who lived in Railway Terrace just a few doors along from Lal's house. Mrs Crowle's house always smelt of dogs and Mrs Wilson's was always dark and smelt of cats. They were friends of Lal's and always liked to see what we had received for Christmas.

Auntie Evelyn and a Auntie Hazel visited us in the afternoon and sometimes stopped for tea. Mum often gave them both Cashmere Bouquet Soap for a present, three cakes in a white box, which had the most beautiful smell. Even now the scent of this soap reminds me of Christmas at home, and sitting on the bed watching Mum wrap up her presents.



My mother, Ida Voysey, outside our family home. Photo: Winsome Phillis