

## IX. Christmas in a Mountain School

The material in this chapter comes from my own personal and family recollections of Glenwood School in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Two generations of my family served as trustees and clerks of the board for the school; two generations also served as teachers at various times. Four generations of my family attended Glenwood School...

Glenwood School is gone now. Weeds and grass grow where it once stood on an open hillside above the railroad tunnel in the narrow northern neck of Glenwood Valley. Great oak trees grew above it on the hill.

The school was a simple, one-room building sided with redwood shiplap cut from trees in the area and milled in the "muley" sawmill

that once stood next to Bean Creek. But in that simple schoolhouse in the little Santa Cruz mountain community Christmas came alive each year.

Children who otherwise would have little or no Christmas at home had it in the schoolhouse. Those were Christmases to remember--and they are still talked about when former students meet.

You hear a lot of jokes about "the little red schoolhouse," but this one was painted a dark red with white trim around the many windows. The American flag was raised each morning from the front porch, which was railed with rough redwood logs with the bark still on them. Maybe the money ran out when they got to the railing, or maybe the carpenter got tired.

Things were much simpler and easier in those days of the one-room school. It was a good school and in some ways, looking back now, it seems superior to what has followed. With only 20 or 25 pupils at most, the teacher could spend more time with the slower ones. And if the teacher didn't have the time, bright older students could help them--and did. Everybody was in the one room. Younger kids who were quicker to learn could listen in on the work of upper grades.

Oh, it wasn't all a bed of roses of course. There were children from poor homes in those years and no welfare or food stamps. They came to school on empty stomachs with holes in their soles and sometimes an apple and piece of bread for lunch if they were lucky.

The teacher was wise. She usually had a pot of soup simmering on the wood stove (later an oil heater) in the corner, and she kept extra cups in her desk. Once in a while she would force some of the soup on the well-to-do kids so the others wouldn't feel what they were getting was charity.

Christmas in the school--that was the magic time--the only magic some of those kids would get.

There were two dark green burlap curtains that squeaked and caught when they were pulled by hand across a sagging wire hung across one end of the schoolroom. A kid stood on each side and pulled when necessary.

The "stage" was merely one end of the schoolroom, the end with the teacher's desk and the old piano. The piano, of course, was part of the show. The last teacher at the school before it closed for good, played the piano with three fingers for all the musical numbers.

Her big oak desk was pushed to one side, and usually there was a big bouquet of red toyon berries to disguise its utilitarian appearance.

The focal point of the stage was the Christmas tree, always a tall one, and when the curtains were pulled open to reveal that sparkling wonder, all eyes fastened on it. Sometimes it was a Douglas fir, sometimes a redwood--it didn't matter--and it was always donated by a parent who had gone out and chopped it down in his own part of the mountain forests.

The tree was elaborately draped in paper chains, glued together by the littlest kids; the older ones had draped silver tinsel on every branch. School-made ornaments cut out of poster paper and glued together were in the shapes of tiny lanterns, stars, angels, Santa Clauses--anything a kid felt like making. Popcorn strings added the touch of "snow" and at the very top of the tree there was always a big silver star.

On every branch several small tin candle holders were clipped securely, and they held tiny candles. They burned fairly fast and presented a dazzling spectacle--dazzling but dangerous. One or two large, reliable boys were stationed where they could keep an eye on the candles as they burned lower. However, there was never an accident in all the years they were used.

The tree was placed on a white sheet to represent snow, and under the tree there were always packages of oranges, nuts, and candles, one for each child in the school and extras for small brothers and sisters.

Everybody in the community came to the school's Christmas program. It was the main event of the year. Parents usually arrived early to take seats on the wood benches arranged in rows. Neighbors greeted each other more quietly than usual--there was something about Christmas in that high-ceilinged room which smelled of ink and floor oil and green branches. Something about the sight of that lavishly decorated tree whose top showed above the closed burlap curtains.

Whisperings and rustlings were obvious from behind that curtain, and the school clock ticked away the minutes until--finally--there came a crashing chord from the piano and the green curtains parted jerkily.

It was a glorious scene on which the children had worked for weeks in their spare time. The tree winked and sparkled with every candle glowing. The children were lined up in rows in front of it--the whole school. Littlest ones in front and taller ones in back. The piano swung into a lively rendition of "Jingle Bells" with everyone singing. At the end of the song an older boy announced the next number and three "kings" appeared to make their way slowly across the stage as the others sang. They were dressed in discarded draperies fashioned into robes and wore gold paper crowns on their heads.

Next a girl stepped forward to announce a poem. And so it went, songs, poems, sleigh bells rung by hand at proper intervals, a small skit with a weary Santa falling asleep at the fireplace while delivering toys. When he went out to get into his sleigh again, two of the older boys clacked wood blocks together for the sound of reindeer hooves on the roof.

The spellbound audience (was there ever better than mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles?) was generous with applause. Small brothers and sisters sitting on parental laps were too engrossed to become fussy or sleepy.

And then--THE announcement: it was time for Santa to appear. A stir went through the room. The teacher's oldest son (or sometimes a neighbor) played the part, clad in a red ski jacket that had served the purpose for 18 years at least, with a fur neckpiece around

the hood, high black boots and a pillow-stuffed belly. He wore a white cotton beard, and his face was rouged for the proper ruddy look.

He appeared suddenly in the doorway, ringing a handbell loudly, a flour sack slung over one shoulder. The older kids glanced secretly and slyly at each other and hid their knowing smiles. The younger ones, innocent of Santa disillusionment yet, stared in wonder--and sometimes squalled in a sudden moment of fright.

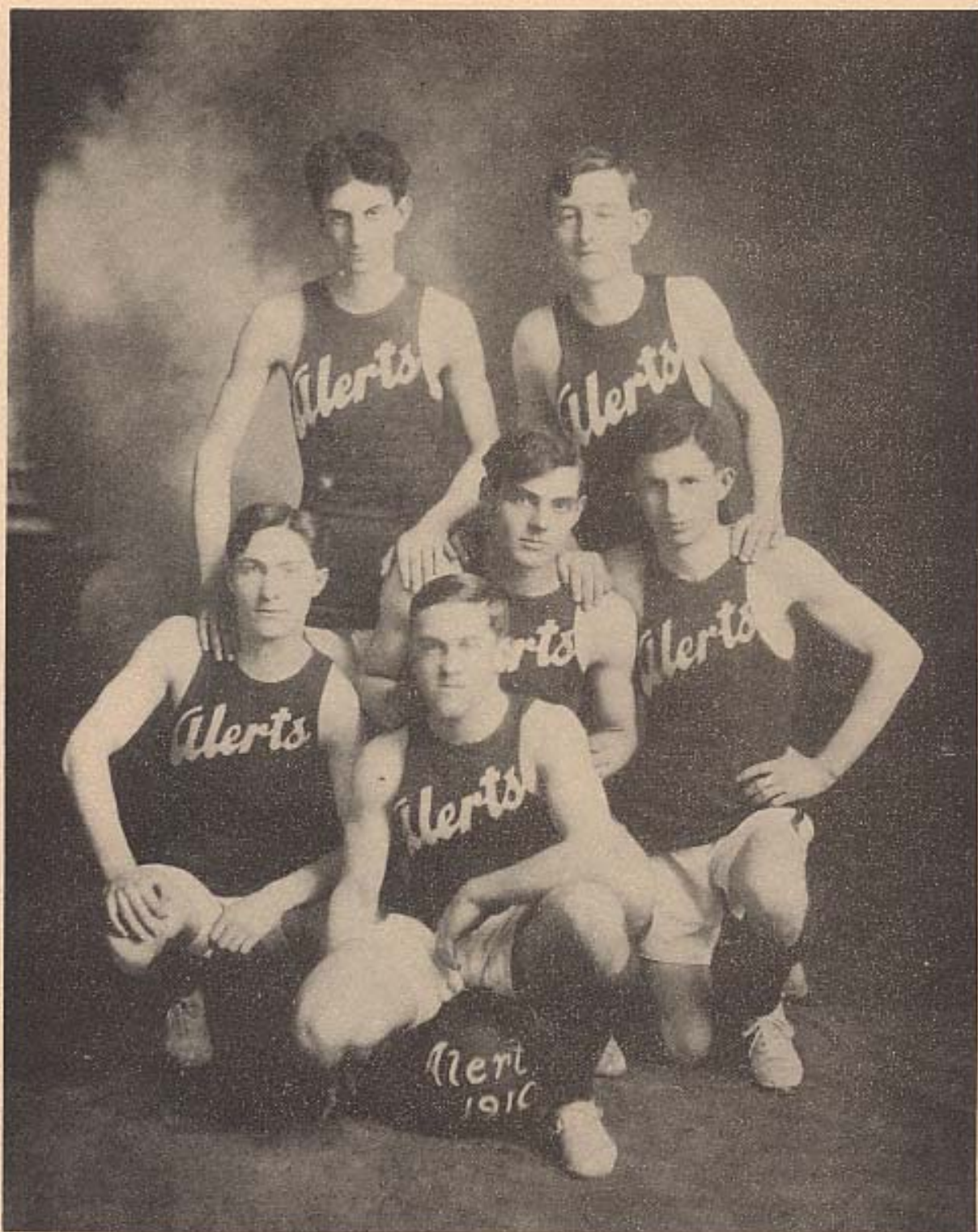
Santa never said much. His conversation was usually "Well, well, well" and "Look who's here!" and "Merry Christmas!" but that was enough.

In Santa's pack there was a small gift for each child and even the frightened ones recovered enough to claim their loot and forget to cry. With a final flourish of his now-empty sack, Santa called a "Merry Christmas and good night!" and disappeared. Parents gathered up children suddenly surfeited with treasures and overcome with weariness, and made their way out into the darkness to drive home.

This was Christmas at Glenwood School, high in the Santa Cruz Mountains.



The GEKs and the PI DELTs were friendly rivals at Santa Cruz High in the early 1900s. Appearing here are such well-known local businessmen as Lester Wessendorf, Lucas F. Smith, Stanley Bias, Elby Bixler, Roy Mosher, Percy Hazzard, Harry Mead, Steve Mead, Bruce Fargo, John Taylor, Bob Fitch, and Howard Metzler.



The Alerts--prize-winning Santa Cruz High School basketball team of 1910. Front row from left: Jack Costella, C. G. Dake, Al Strong, and Hi Gosliner. Standing from left: Joe Gosliner and a fellow named Johnson.



Zasu Pitts, who went from a poverty-stricken childhood in Santa Cruz to stardom in Hollywood. Her "Oh, dear me"--delivered with appropriate gestures--took her to the top as a comedienne, a far cry from her hand-me-down gingham dresses and waiting on tables in her mother's boarding house.