

Christmas Money

When I began to grow up, or at least think I was, I wanted my own money to spend for Christmas. I wanted to buy some gifts, it made me feel grown-up, and that made me feel good. I also wanted to buy some firecrackers and the like and maybe some things that I would not get for Christmas. The money was not handed out to me. Rather, it was suggested that I earn the money. I was already trapping rabbits and selling them, but that is another story.

It was suggested that I gather wild Holly and Mistletoe and arrange it in small bunches and sell it to earn some money. In those days wild Holly was frequently used for Christmas decorating. Mistletoe was also used but a much lesser quantity. Folklore says that if you hang Mistletoe over a door and a girl stands under it, you may kiss her. There were a lot of games played with that tradition.

There were two large Holly trees on the farm; one or the other was usually covered in red berries. Mistletoe, which has white berries, was kinda sparse and grew as a parasite in very tall trees. I was a pretty good tree climber but after inspecting a couple of the tall trees with small bunches of mistletoe near the top I decided that Holly would be my product.

I took my small axe, the fruit tree pruner and my trusty pocketknife and headed for the woods where the Holly tree was located. First I tried to get the Holly by reaching the limbs from the ground. It doesn't work very well for a youngster. So I climbed the tree. Holly leaves are very prickly, much more so than I realized. But I stuck with it, and after a while I had a pretty good pile of small Holly limbs. It never occurred to me how I was going to carry them to the house until I got down from the tree.

I had to carry my tools as well as the Holly. Every time I tried to pick up the blasted stuff, the prickly leaves stuck me. After several attempts I got most of it in my arms and headed to the house, frequently being stuck along the way. As I remember I had to put it down and re-gather it up a couple of times. Finally I reached the house and dumped my load on the back porch, proud of my accomplishment so far.

The plan was for me to accompany Dad on his milk route, and offer to sell the Holly to his milk customers. I had no idea how to prepare it for sale; I just had a bunch of Holly limbs. I asked Mom. She came out and looked at it, and promptly ruined my day. "Why son you can't sell it like that" she said, "don't you understand that you have to cut and tie it in little bundles of about 6 or 8 little limbs about 12 to 15 inches long"? No, I didn't understand. Nobody bothered to tell me that. "Why just go down in the woods, cut you some Holly and go with Dad on his route and sell it", was all I was told. Boy did I have a lot to learn.

I began to try to save most of what I had gathered by cutting it as Mom had suggested and tying it in small bundles, kinda like a bunch of cut flowers. "And oh by the way" Mom said, "you ought to put that Holly in a little tub of water to keep it fresh".

Great, just great, this ain't a lot of fun. But I stayed at it and when I finished my hands were stuck all over and I realized I did not have much Holly to sell. I sure wasn't going to make much Christmas money off this. I'll just have to go back and get some more – tomorrow I guess.

The next day I went back to the Holly tree. This time I didn't even carry my little axe, just a sharp pocketknife and Mom's flower pruning shears. Back up the tree I went, positioning myself where I could reach the small limbs with lots of leaves and berries. As soon as I had all I could carry, back to the house I went to bundle it all up and set it in the tub ready to sell.

I remember going on the route with Dad. I was shy and embarrassed to ask the customers to buy my Holly at first. In the beginning Dad would ask his customers if they would like to buy a bunch of my Holly, and frequently they did. Till this day I don't know whether they wanted the Holly or were just being nice to a young redheaded boy. Anyway, I began to get excited about the prospect when the change began to rattle in my pocket. I lost some of my shyness and began to ask them myself and I always sold it all.

So it became a ritual every year for me to sell Holly on Dad's route the last two route days before Christmas. This continued until I was about fifteen. By today's standard as I look back, the money seems very little, but in the days of WWII it was a lot of money to a kid, and you could buy a few small gifts in those days with not much money. Those are good memories, and it was good experience and a good lesson. I listen to the psychologist on TV today telling modern day parents what to do with their problem children and I wonder. Maybe they should tell them to go climb a Holly tree and learn how to earn a quarter. Who would listen? I can just hear the snickers now.



By Thomas H. Ewing
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