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Christmas as Celebrated in My Childhood

As told by **Nils William Olsson**
to his grandchildren and other listeners

Introduction

I have been asked to relate something about the celebration of Christmas of my childhood and I shall try to depict how this holiday was celebrated in my village of Killeberg in northern Skåne at the beginning of the 20th century. Bear in mind that we resided in a rural area, where there was no electricity, and where we used kerosene lamps for lighting. TV and radio were non-existent and life as a whole was rather primitive, without indoor plumbing. We had six miles to the nearest pharmacy. If we needed a prescription filled we had to send it to Älmhult via the morning train and fetch the medicine via the afternoon southbound express.

Preparations

Preparations for Christmas began early. The first thing was to pick out a suitable Christmas tree.¹ Since we lived near the forest, partly owned by my uncle Anthon, we had his permission to choose our tree early. About the middle of November we purchased the Christmas delicacy *lutfish*,² which consisted of sundried cod, hard as a board. It had to be softened to be edible and was placed in a pan of water laced with lye. Every evening my parents would exchange the water, so as to keep the water fresh. Later in November and early December mother would make preparations for Christmas food.

She baked many types of cookies and the high point was when we

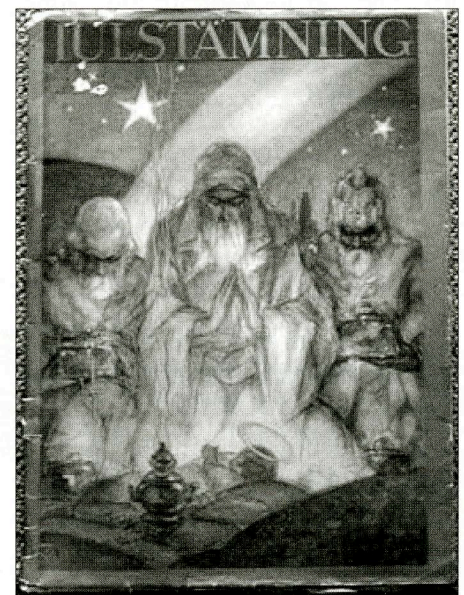
siblings were all given a slice of dough to make our own *pepparkakor* and to name our creations. I have forgotten what I made, but I still remember what my sister Lillie named her cookie *vovväxling*. Mother also made a special rye bread for the holidays.

Next came the preparation of meatballs, pork and potato sausage, the fresh Christmas ham, head cheese made from a bought half pig's head and a special veal concoction called *kalvsylta*. Herring was bought and made into all types of herring delicacies, such as *ättikssill*, *kryddsill*, etc.

A specialty of Swedish Christmas was the publishing of special Christmas magazines, which came out about the first of December. All publishing companies, church groups, and many non-profit organizations had their own version of the



A modern Swedish Christmas Coffee table.



One of the Christmas magazines.

Christmas publications, *jultidningar*, aimed at children, youth, and adults, usually filled with original Christmas stories, poems, cultural articles, puzzles, and sometimes including art reproductions which ultimately ended up festooning the outhouse. At the age of eleven I became the agent for one of these publishers and made the round of the village, taking orders, collecting money, and delivering the magazines in time for Christmas. Needless to say I also made a little pocket money.

Celebration

As the days of December sped by and we came closer to the holiday, we children began a countdown, usually five days before Christmas Eve. I

should mention that at noon on Christmas Eve the holiday was ushered in by all of us gathering in the kitchen, beginning the ceremony by singing "*Fröjdas vart sinne, julen är inne*," [All rejoice, Christmas is here].

Then we all took a slice of rye bread and dipped it into a pot of boiling ham stock made from cooking the Christmas ham. As we consumed the bread we wished each other Merry Christmas. Because of this annual ritual, Christmas Eve became known as *dopparedan* [dipping day]. Thus we counted the days before *dopparedan* by reciting as we arose "Today is the fifth day before dipping day," [*dan före dan före dopparedan*] counting down each day until we awoke on the morning of the magic day Christmas Eve.

After having "dipped in the pot" [*dopp i grytan*] at noon, we children became impatient with how slowly the time passed before the evening's event. In desperation mother went

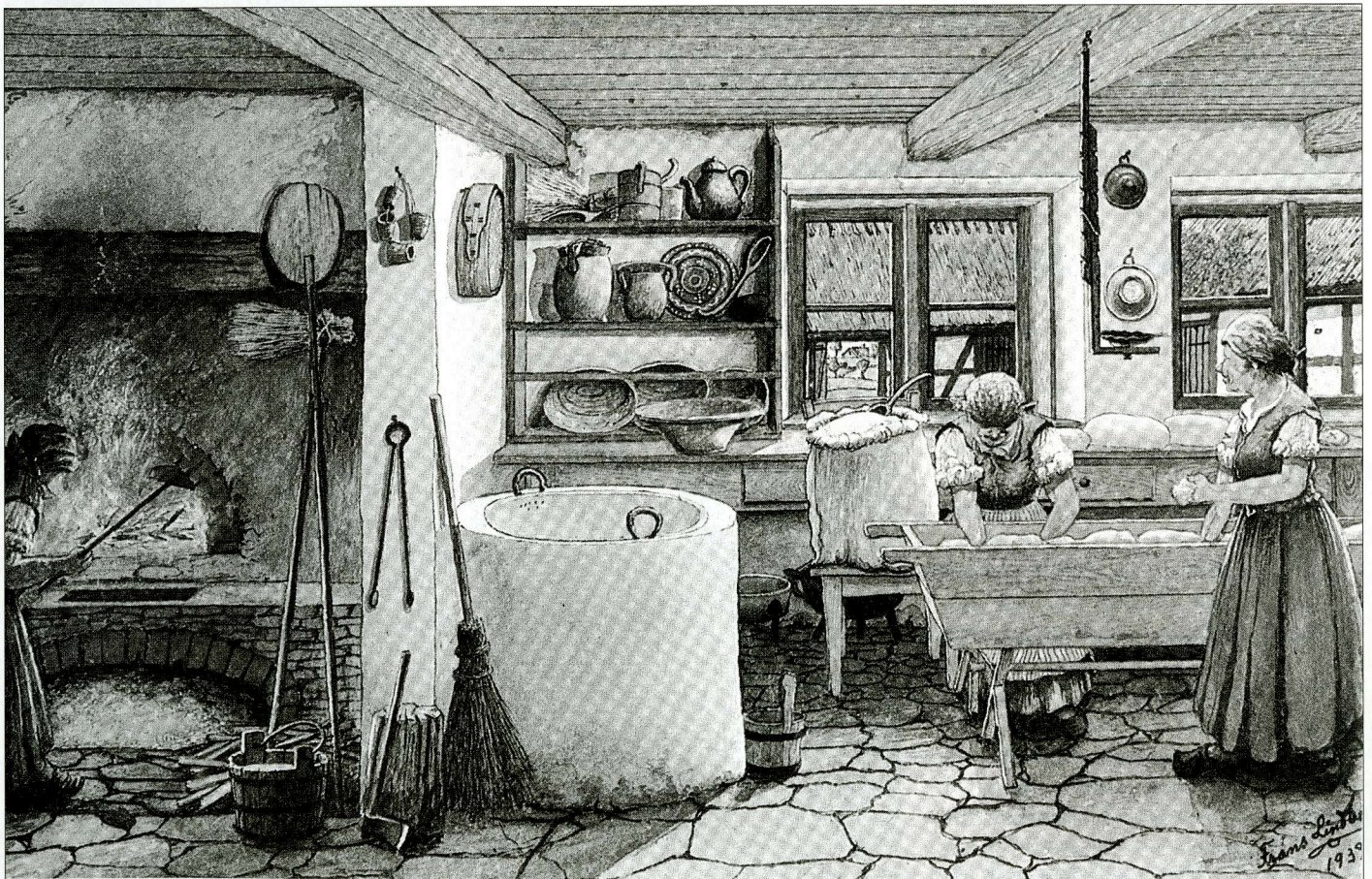
up into the attic and brought down the Christmas magazines of the previous year which she wisely had saved. This maneuver silenced us and restored a certain sense of tranquillity.

Julaftons middag

At six o'clock we gathered for the Christmas Eve dinner, when the goodies mother had prepared over a period of weeks made their appearance, beginning with the *smörgåsbord*, continuing with *lutfisk* served with boiled potatoes and melted butter. Then came the climax: rice porridge [*risgrynsgröt*], served with half-and-half cream, sugar, and cinnamon. Mother had hidden a blanched almond³ in the porridge and there was great merriment when we discovered who was the lucky finder. Finally came the last of the feasting: *klenor* or *klenätter*⁴ served with strawberry jam. These cakes were made of the same dough as

doughnuts and fried in hot grease.

Then came the main event of the day, the gathering around the Christmas tree, which was lit by live candles [we did not worry about the tree catching fire since it was freshly cut and impervious to flames]. Since father was in the U.S. over two Christmases, attempting to save money for our passage to the United States, it was up to mother to read the Christmas story from St. Luke. I have to admit that my attention flitted from mother's reading the Gospel to the pile of packages beckoning under the tree. The reading finally over, we opened the presents. We noted that there were two types – soft and hard – the former consisted usually of mittens, sweaters, socks, underwear, and while appreciated, they were put aside in favor of the hard packages, which contained such exciting things as books, Christmas magazines, and toys.



A kitchen in the Österlen area of Skåne, late 1800s. Painted by Frans Lindberg. From "*Julen förr i tiden*" by Ebbe Schön, 1993. The round white barrel to the right of the fireplace is the washtub.

A very special Christmas

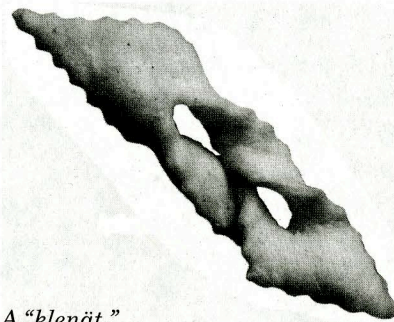
The Christmas of 1921 is most vividly etched in my memory. Most of December had passed and we had not heard from father, who usually was a good correspondent. Noting mother's sad face from worrying, after the distribution of the presents, I volunteered to run down to the post office in the railroad station to check the mailbox. Mother objected, saying it was of no use, we had already picked up the day's mail. I insisted and donning my brand new pullover sweater I ran down the railroad track, breathing a prayer "Good God, let there be a letter from father." I opened box Number 76 and lo the prayer was answered. There lay a letter from father with the well-known U.S. stamps. I literally flew home and we all rejoiced that that Christmas Eve had ended on a very joyous note.

Notes:

- 1) The earliest note of a Christmas tree in Sweden comes from the noble family of Wrede-Sparre at Stora Lundy in Södermanland in 1741. See Nils Arvid Bringéus, *Årets festdagar* (1999), p. 132.
- 2) According to a 1968 survey, only 49% of the participants in the survey had *lutfisk* on their table. See Bringéus, *op.cit.* p. 136.
- 3) The person who found the almond was going to get married during the next year. See Bringéus, *op.cit.* p. 137.
- 4) A recipe for "*klenätter*":
3 tablespoons butter
5 egg yolks
4 tablespoons granulated sugar
grated rind from half a lemon
2-3 cups ordinary wheat flour

Melt the butter and let it cool. Mix egg yolks and sugar, and then mix in the other ingredients until it makes a firm cookie dough. Let it sit in the fridge overnight.

Next day roll the dough out thinly. Then cut it into slanting rectangles 10 centimeters long and three centimeters wide. Make a slit in the middle of each piece, along the middle, and then turn the end of the cookie through the slit. It should look like the picture. Then deep-fry a few cookies at a time until golden.



A "*klenät*."

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