

A story from Christmas past

This week's Byline takes a break from politics to tell a Christmas story. Last summer, while browsing in a used book store, I was drawn to a small volume written by Cyrus Townsend Brady called "Recollections of a Missionary in the Great West." After finding out that the "great west" referred to my native state of Kansas, I purchased the book so that I could read about those early days. Among the anecdotes about his years tending to the needs of a scattered rural population was this Christmas story. My repeating the story is my Christmas gift to all of you.

After service I went to dinner at the nearest farmhouse. Such a Christmas dinner it was! There was no turkey and they did not even have a chicken. The menu was cornbread, ham and potatoes, and few potatoes at that. There were two children in the family, a girl of six and a boy of five. They were glad enough to get the ham. Their usual bill of fare was composed of potatoes and cornbread, and sometimes cornbread alone. My wife had put up a lunch for me, fearing that I might not be able to get anything to eat, in which there was a small mince pie turnover. I produced the turnover, which my common consent was divided between the astonished children. Such a glistening of eyes and smacking of small lips you never saw!

"This pie makes it seem like Christmas, after all," said the little girl, with her mouth full. "We didn't have any Christmas this year. Last year mother made us some potato men." "But this year," interrupted the boy, "potatoes are so scarce that we couldn't have 'em. Mother says that next year perhaps we will have some real Christmas."

They were so brave about it that my heart went out to them. Children, and no Christmas gifts! Only the chill bare room, the wretched meager meal. I ransacked my brain. Finally something occurred to me. After dinner I excused myself and hurried back to the church. There were two baskets there which were used for the collection - old but rather pretty. I selected the best one. Fortunately, I had in my grip a neat little sewing kit which contained a pair of scissors, a huge thimble, needles, thread, a tiny little pin cushion, an emery bag, buttons, etc. I emptied the contents into the collection basket, and garnished the dull little affair with the bright ribbon ties ripped off the sewing kit and went back to the house.

To the boy I gave my penknife, which happened to be nearly new, and to the girl the church basket with the sewing things for a work basket. The joy of those children was one of the finest things I have ever witnessed. The face of the little girl was positively filled with awe as she lifted from the basket one by one the pretty and useful articles, and when I added a small box of candy that my children had provided me, they looked at me with feelings of reverence, almost as a visible incarnation of Santa Claus. They were the cheapest and most effective Christmas presents it was ever my pleasure to bestow. I hope to be forgiven for putting the church furniture to such secular use.