



# the painted box

by Wendy Thomson

Christmas cards — enjoyed by many, considered a nuisance by some. How do I feel about them?

For a quite a number of years, they've been one of the joys of Christmas for me.

The first ones I remember sending were when I was seven. We'd moved to Vancouver Island, and I was missing friends and family more than ever, over the holiday season.

The fact that I mailed them without benefit of stamps didn't worry me — I figured it was the thought that counted.

Over the following years, in Toronto, much of the fun was in the making of cards, using colored paper, brilliant scraps of colored foil, and Christmas stickers. Sometimes we printed our own greetings using lino-block or carved potato stamps.

Then there was always the excitement when the mail came. All morning I'd have an ear cocked for the sound of the brass letter flap on the door, and the slither of the envelopes sliding through and onto the floor.

Sometimes there'd be one big splat if something was too big for the slot and the mailman just opened the door and dropped everything inside.

Even though we lived on the second floor, I was usually first to the front hall, sliding down the banister to hasten matters. For the next little while I was in seventh heaven with the huge pile of mail for my grandparents and us.

I'd sort it and pile it neatly on the window sill below the large stained-glass window, being careful not to burn my knees on the radiator below.

The two weeks before Christmas, there were two deliveries each day, as the postman couldn't carry all the mail at once. I watched from the upstairs window to catch a glimpse of him trudging through the snow, and would fly to meet him at the door.

Things were different in Acton, of course. Betty MacIntyre (and in later years, Cal) would drive up the road at the same time every morning, and I always managed to be doing my dusting or vacuuming where I could keep an eye peeled. If there was a parcel too big for the box, their horn would be honking all the way down the hill, and I was into my boots and down to the road in no time.

If I happened to miss the great event of the mail's arrival, by standing on tiptoe in the den or bedroom, I could see over the bushes to the mail box. And if the snowplow hadn't knocked the box over, I'd be able to see if it was parallel or perpendicular to the road, meaning "No Mail" or "Mail". All householders were dropped until the pile was collected and gone over.

Once again, mail delivery and the sorting is a little different. We drive two miles to Buck Creek to pick it up at the Confectionary Store, where it's crammed into one of the forty boxes on the wall.

Once we get it home, it's sorted on top of the freezer in the kitchen, with the family hovering over like vultures, everyone wanting his share.

For me, the excitement is always the same, though. I like to make a cup of tea, head off into a comfortable corner, and savor each card and letter, one by one.

There are cards from friends, old and new, cards from strangers, cards with notes saying "We're still here" or with a new address. There are all kinds of bits of information — where there were two in a family, there are now three; or sometimes the sad news is that the "two" is now one alone.

The sending of Christmas cards is as special to me as the receiving, as it offers the chance to send messages, even though they're not often written out in so many words.

To friends visited, or ones not seen lately, my cards say "It was great to see you," or "Although we didn't get together, I think of you often."

To friends — "I'm glad to know you," or to strangers, "Thanks for getting in touch; you've brightened my day."

There are greetings to the family which is getting more

and more widespread, with cards now going to the Netherlands and Central-America as well as many points in Ontario and Saskatchewan.

One special card goes to a lady I haven't seen in over 15 years, Miss Dunlop, my grade four teacher long ago in Toronto. Since she was "old" to my young eyes back then, it's with a great feeling of relief that I see an envelope bearing her flowing script in the mail each Christmas.

Right now, our dining table is piled high with cards, note paper, photos and stamps, all waiting to be put together — and seemingly impossible task.

Why, then, am I so eager to begin?



THERE IS NOTHING like an Ontario rural landscape to capture the peace and serenity of the holiday season. Ontario's farm families, like their urban neighbors, will gather to celebrate the season's festivities. (Photo by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food)

## Clean bill of health for poinsettia plant

Since 1919, stories unsubstantiated by medical and scientific fact have circulated about the poinsettia at Christmas time, when the plant is at the peak of its popularity. According to one tale, the two-year-old child of an Army officer stationed in Hawaii died from eating a poinsettia leaf (braet).

This unfortunate, unfounded story helped scare people into thinking that the poinsettia is poisonous. It has led to the belief that parts of the plant, if ingested by humans or pets, could be lethal.

To scientifically resolve the charges against the poinsettia, and to alleviate public fear concerning its alleged toxicity, the floral industry launched an intensive investigation. The Society of American Florists, America's floriculture national trade association, collaborated with The Ohio State University on a poinsettia research project. The objective was to determine whether there is any foundation to the allegation that the poinsettia (scientific name: Euphorbia Pulcherrima) is a poisonous plant.

At the conclusion of the research work by Robert P. Stone and W.J. Collins, members of the Academic Faculty of Entomology, The Ohio State University, the study established that the rat, when given unusually high doses of the poinsettia, shows no mortality, no symptoms of toxicity, and no changes in dietary intake or general behavior pattern.

Animal tests are accepted as valid by the United States Consumer Products Safety Commission in determining whether any product or natural growth is harmful to human health and, thus, is subject to labeling as required by the Federal Hazardous Act.

The Ohio State University research on the poinsettia plant has effectively debunked "old wives' tales" that the poinsettia is harmful to human and animal health if parts of the plant are ingested.

During 1975, a citizen living in New York filed a petition with the Consumer Products Safety Commission demanding that poinsettia plants carry caution labels when offered for sale to the public. The petitioner charged that the poinsettia is poisonous and potentially lethal to humans and animals.

On Dec. 19, 1975, after reviewing all available information relating to the poinsettia, the Commission issued a statement denying the petition to require caution labeling. A Commission press release pointed out that poinsettia leaves, like those of many other plants, may cause varying degrees of discomfort if eaten, and should be placed out of the reach of small children.

The Consumer and Corporate Affairs issues a leaflet on questionable plants titled "Think Safety — These Lovely Poisonous Plants". The list includes a number of plants that can cause a series of ailments from skin irritation to poisoning of the system.

The poinsettia has been removed from the publication. National radio-TV and press authority John Bradshaw dispelled the myth by

publicly eating poinsettia leaves at a press reception.

To protect the public health from even a remote possibility of danger from the poinsettia and other floral products, Flowers Canada and SAF has stressed that children should be warned to put nothing in their mouths except food products. They should be taught respect for all potentially hazardous substances, including medicine, cleaning agents, etc.

In 1975, approximately 2,500,000 poinsettia plants were used by Canadians to provide a touch of beauty, color, warmth, and comfort in their daily lives. This provides evidence that people attach special meaning to the poinsettia.

The poinsettia derives its name from Joel R. Poinsett, American Ambassador to Mexico in 1821. He introduced the plant into the United States so that Americans

could enjoy its colorful loveliness—with flaming scarlet bracts that suggest petals, surrounding small yellow flowers and contrasted against light green leaves.

## Hawaiian TREAT

Fruits, nuts, cookies and sweets delight the hearts of children everywhere at Christmas. Here, with a bow to our 50th state, is the recipe for a hot bread which should be of interest to the family cook:

**Hawaiian Nut Bread**  
(Makes 1 loaf)  
2 eggs  
1/2 cup sugar  
1/2 cup melted shortening  
2 cups sifted all-purpose flour  
3 teaspoons baking powder  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 cup chopped nuts  
1 cup crushed canned pineapple (do not drain)

Beat eggs and sugar together; add shortening. Sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Add dry ingredients to first mixture and blend. Add nuts and pineapple. Stir just enough to combine. Pour batter into a greased 4x8-inch loaf pan. Bake in a moderate (350°F.) oven for one hour. Let loaf cool thoroughly before slicing.

## Professor Probably Trimmed First Tree

No one is sure when the first Christmas tree appeared in America. Many believe the credit belongs to Charles Follen, a German professor who taught at Harvard. In 1812, he trimmed a tree for his small son. The following year, other Bostonians followed suit.

Later, trees became more popular when Prince Albert, German-born consort of Queen Victoria popularized the Christmas tree in England by setting one up in Windsor Castle. Many Americans, eager to copy their sophisticated British cousins, trimmed a tree of their own.

The big boost came as late as 1845 when the best-selling "Kris Kringle's Christmas Tree" showed Americans how a Christmas tree should properly be decorated.

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