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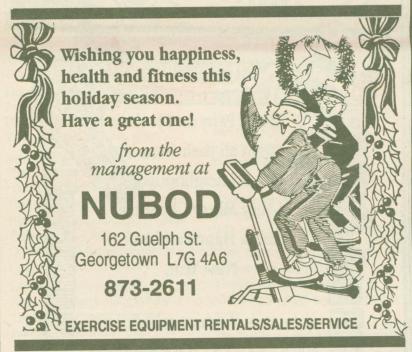
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CHRISTMA

" 'Tis the season to be jolly and "Ho Ho Ho!" and "Merry Christmas" and "Season's Greetings". It is time for all the greetings and festive get-togethers that highlight that most special time of the year Christmas.

Like many, I am a sentimentalist over Christmas. You know - the lump in the throat every time you hear a favorite carol. And though we get the same bombardment every year about the commercialism of Christmas, and the greed of Christmas, it still shines through as the finest commemoration festival of which we are capable.

Like most families, our Christmas celebration is one steeped in the traditions of our own founding families, and it is great to see the traditions carried on by our children with some new wrinkles from the in-laws. Our Christmas celebration is a liberal mix of the religious, the Christmas myths and yes, some of the commercialism.

And though Christmas present purchasing can happen at any time during the year, the obvious things start to happen about December 15th. First, the outside lights go up. We seem to alternate between a cut tree on the front porch or loading our shrubs or a lawn tree with lights. The first family get-together of Christmas is when the in-door tree goes up. Everybody is involved with lights, ornaments and tinsel with the Christmas songs and carols in the background. Without fail, someone will say that this Christmas tree is just about the nicest one we have ever had, regardless of a slight list to the left or right. All the indoor decorations are set out and hung at the same time, leaving no doubt that the season has indeed arrived.

Our Christmas Eve tradition calls for the official Christmas dinner on the Eve, and everyone gathers to open the gifts right after dinner. The dinner is roast turkey, of course, but notable side dishes are red cabbage, containing apples and cinnamon, hot green bean salad and daughter Becky always makes the most decadent chocolate mousse ever tasted! The table centre piece is made up in the afternoon and contains red candles, plus fresh holly, ivy, pine and spruce boughs.

On Christmas morning, every body returns so Kelly can check on what Santa left for her at Gram's house and everyone else gets a stocking full of goodies from 'ole Jolly. All assemble again on Christmas afternoon for a festive drink. A glass of wine or champagne or for the hardy a Purple Flash! This drink is only mixed on Christmas afternoon and was originally devised by my father-in-law, bless him. The major components are scotch whiskey and blackberry brandy (recipe available on request). Then the BBQ is fired up for a Christmas dinner of baked potatoes, steak and salad. Stuffed again!

Boxing Day is drop in or drop around day, and then a few days rest before we hit the parties, parades and football of New Years. It's tough work - but somebody has to do it!

Merry Christmas!