

Nora Tollefson Danforth's memories of Marit Evansdatter Rudi
Tollefson's recounting of her childhood Christmases in Norway
1835-1853

Inspiration has come to me to do what mother often suggested and what I've long intended to do—write up for the benefit of my children and my nieces and nephews, an account of the childhood memories of my mother as she told them to us. She had, as I see it now, a marvelous power of description, and a host of blessed, happy memories of her youth across the sea. When she began to recount them to us, though we might have heard them before, the wheels of household activities ceased—and we listened—interrupting once in a while to hear of some feature we probably had often known long before.

If our childhood memories measure the success of our work in their rearing, then my grandfather and grandmother were wonderfully successful, for the life in that home was lacking in none of the attributes that make for the building of real character. The day will come before long when my sons and daughters will use their paternal ancestry to enter the Colonial Dames, the D.A.R. and the like. When that day comes, I want them to know that they come of sturdy, worthwhile stock on the maternal side, as well, and that theirs is truly a godly heritage which they must carry unsullied.

My mother, you must know, was born and raised in the country of Norway, in the county of Valdres, in the township of Estre Slidre—upon a *gaard*—little more than a farm—shall we say a “limited estate”—known as “*Paa Rude*.” In her mother's family there were no sons to inherit the place so my grandmother came into possession of it. A splendid young man from a neighboring county came then to work—found favor in my grandmother's eyes. She married him (I say it advisedly) and he became Evan Rudi, leaving behind his old “*gaard's naven*” and becoming identified with the home he married into.

I believe that my mother was the fifth of their seven children. To her dying day, her father was her ideal of all a man should be. She used to describe him to us so lovingly—tall, dark, fine looking—like our cousin Even was in his younger days. But she always closed by saying “except that instead

of cousin Even's brown eyes, his eyes were dark deep blues—just like this child [Nora]—she is the only one who has grandfather's eyes exactly."

Those memories date back from 1835 to 1853, for my mother was born on May 6, 1835 and left her childhood home for adventure in this land of promise when she was seventeen. We nearly always talked English in our home, but mother always told these stories in Norwegian, probably because it is difficult to find English synonyms for many of the words needed.

In that home, at that time—high in the *fjeld*—all the activities of the fall centered on Christmas. The birthday of the Christ was the climax of the year's work and its coming was the inspiration to complete every bit of work, that all might be free to celebrate the Yuletide together. In early October, when the family reassembled at the home place, for the stock had been brought back *fra sattern* [the highlands] where they had fed since May, and since May part of the family had lived up there in "summer homes" taking care of the herds, and making butter and cheeses for market. From October on, for nearly three months, the approach of Christmas was foremost in all minds. Food of all kinds must be stored up in plenty for the long winter months, cattle slaughtered, and the meat salted and cured. Grandfather must make a trip to town, which took a week, to bring home sugar and salt, coffee, and such other supplies as were not produced on the place. Plenty of blankets and homespun for clothes had to be carded, spun, woven, and sewed. The semi-annual visit of the shoemaker for a week or two, must be considered, when he made and repaired shoes for them all. Then as Christmas came nearer, every loose shingle, and every hinge and every board on the outbuildings was looked after and repaired against the winter's blasts. Every fence must be in perfect condition, and the fields and yards cleaned of refuse and made ready for spring.

The last ten days before the great holiday was spent by the women in baking great quantities of *lefse*—the flatbrod and the Yulebrod, *fatig mand*, *kranser*, and the rest as well as in brewing great casks of ale, to tide them over the holiday which lasted until twelfth night.

The morning of the day before Christmas found a tremendous hurry and excitement, for by six o'clock—the magic hour of ushering in the birthday of the Christ—all loose ends must be caught up, every member of the family must bathe and dress from head to foot in new, or at least fresh and clean

linen and clothing and the house and all therein, must be freshly scrubbed and decked in holiday attire.

Then at six precisely, the entire family assembled at one long table. Grandfather went to the shelf and brought the several books—*nusandakts bog*, the *Bible*, and the hymnbook, and placed them before grandmother. (Why grandmother? Because he was the prince consort or because she read best?) She then read the scripture story of the birth of Christ, prayers were said, several of the Christmas hymns were sung, and then they were ready for the supper. Here we children always interrupted—“and then you had a feast”—and mother would say, “No—nothing unusual, but always *lefse* and *lutefisk*, with *flotte grot* for a special treat. After a merry evening the family retired early for Christmas day, too, brought its round.

Early before anyone stirred, grandmother arose, and went from bed to bed waking her family, to wish them *Gladilig Yule* and to serve each upon awakening, a glass of ale and cakes.

Then while breakfast was being prepared and the stock was fed and cared for and to each animal and fowl was given an extra measure of grain in memory of the Christ; bundles of grain were tied on poles in the dooryard to give the birds their Christmas feast.

Then during the morning the poor of the neighborhood began to come with their baskets, to get what the more prosperous would give them of their plenty. In those days there was no talk of community chests—welfare workers were unknown—there were no drives or tag days, but he who had gave to those who had not, according to their need. Mother used to say that no *fattig* [poor person] ever left her father's door with empty basket, and at Christmas—to give to the poor from their generous store was to give to the Christ.

Then we children used to say “then you all went to church” and my mother answered, “No, never on Christmas day, for it was three Norske miles to church or 15 miles as distance is measured here—and in the short days of their winter in that high northland country, the distance was not to be lightly considered.

During the whole Christmas period, twenty days, they kept open house, visiting among their friends and neighbors, ministering to the needy and doing nothing but the regular routine work of the place.

I often think what a beautiful Christmas it was and how the season must have brightened the long dreary winter with its short days and its cold and snow and ice. Could we today go back from the age of gift-giving and tinsel and holly and brilliant wrappings to the age of giving solely of ourselves and our efforts to our own and those about us? In so doing, we would leave to our children a heritage, too, of blessed memories of happy Christmases.

Note: This text was typed on a Macintosh computer by Barbara Marit Tabbert, (granddaughter of Nora Danforth) in March of 1992 from a carbon copy of a document typed by Marit Kelly (Nora's niece) which Nora must have at some point hand-written (date unknown) and sent to Marit Kelly. Marit Kelly sent the carbon copy to Marit Taylor (Nora's daughter) in 19 ?