

# The Stockings Were Hung By The Chimney With Care

by Lynne Belluscio

When I was in California two weeks ago, I told my son, since he was on his way to China and wouldn't be back until a couple of days before Christmas, that I'd go shopping for Christmas stockings for the three kids. I knew he just wouldn't have time.

The tradition of Christmas stockings has always been important in my family. As a kid, I would hang a sock on the corner of the bed and in the morning it would be replaced with a Christmas stocking filled with little presents and candy – and always an orange in the toe. There were plenty of walnuts, and chocolate candy wrapped in foil, and at least one candy cane. I remember the gold foil wrapped chocolate coins in a little gold net bag. There was always a box of candy cigarettes.

We didn't have a fireplace, so I figured that hanging the stocking on the bed post was the next best thing. What I learned as I got older, my father decided it was a good "stall tactic." I would wake up at 4 in the morning and want to go downstairs to open presents. "Lynne, open your stocking first, and then go back to sleep for a little while and then you can go downstairs." So my children had stockings on the bedpost for the early years. Eventually the stockings were on the fireplace, but the stockings had to be opened first, before the presents under the tree.

I remember filling my father-in-laws stocking, always took on a certain challenge. I would make a visit to Sibley's grocery section and pick up "delectables" such as anchovies, rain-deer meat balls, and small bottles of liqueurs. I can still see Fred opening the little wrapped gifts, and laughing when he discovered what I had found that year to put in his stocking. After my daughter was married, I searched the candy stores for obscure stuff for my son-in-law's stocking. There is some pretty gross candy out there. One year I discovered bacon band aides and wrapped them up.

I never gave the story of stockings much thought, until I was preparing for the Wolcott Street students' visit to a "Victorian Christmas" at LeRoy House. The

tradition of Christmas stockings is mentioned in the 1822 poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" which we know as the "Night Before Christmas." "The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hope that St. Nicholas soon would be there." And later in the poem, "He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work, And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk ..."

It seems that the stocking tradition traces back to Europe where a poor man had three beautiful daughters. He despaired for their future, because he did not have dowries for the girls. St. Nicholas knew of the poor man's plight, and knew that the man would not accept charity. So one night, when the wash was hanging near the fireplace, St. Nicholas threw three bags of gold coins in the window into the drying stockings.

(Another story tells that he threw the coins down the chimney.) In the morning, the gold coins were discovered, and the girls had dowries. They all mar-

ried and lived happily ever after. Sometimes, in the story, the gold coins were gold balls instead, and the tradition of the stocking filled with an orange can be traced to that story.

There is also some credibility to stories that children in France and the Netherlands, filled wooden shoes with hay and carrots for Santa's reindeer. After St. Nicholas' visit, the hay and carrots were gone and were replaced with candy and small toys for the children. The shoes, were later replaced with stockings.

My mother's family rarely had a Christmas tree, having grown up during the Depression, but she did remember receiving an orange in a stocking. As she told me, the orange was so precious because it was so expensive. I

have heard, that in the 19th century, the orange was so uncommon, that if you did receive an orange, everything was savored, and after the orange was eaten, the peel was saved and boiled in sugar water until it was tender and then cut in thin strips and rolled in sugar as a treat – candied orange peel.

If children were not good, their stockings might be filled with coal instead of candy and presents. I discovered that the origin of this story can be traced to Italy and Sicily. La Befana is a kindly old witch who delivers presents instead of Santa Claus on January 6. But she leaves coal for bad children. As a joke, some children receive a candy, called Carbone Dolce, that looks like coal.

