

Christmas Angel

by Tamra K. Stitt

In the Early 1900's my great grandfather homesteaded what is called Burns Creek, Idaho which is located about 15 miles above Heise Hot Springs. My great grandfather, was a rough, tough, old trapper who built the first road along the Snake River to Table Rock, and then on to Burns Creek by hand. He had lived in the wilds all his life. He trapped for a living and sent furs to a fur trader who arranged to send his daughter, Bess, out to Carl to marry. My great grandmother was 17 years old when they were married. She kept a detailed journal of her experiences in her new home. She hated Burns Creek, Idaho. She wrote how isolated and alone she felt. She wrote the following story in her journal.

Bess was 24 years old and pregnant with her fourth child. She had asked Carl if he would take some of his furs to the valley and trade them for supplies and the things she had asked for on her Christmas list. She was embarrassed at how much she was asking for. Her list consisted of: peppermint, chocolate and a little piece of yard goods to make her only little girl a new dress. Carl agreed to make the trip to the valley and also bring her home a Christmas tree. He left her in fine shape. He had chopped lots of wood and all she had to do for the three days he would be gone was to go to the barn and milk the old cow.

She wrote that on the first day he was gone that she and the children made cookies for Christmas and a thick pudding. They made paper chains for the tree their father would bring back to them. The second day a tremendous blizzard hit the mountain. It snowed and the wind howled for the next two days. When the storm finally subsided, she wrote how she tried to get out of the cabin to milk the bellowing old cow, but that an ice drift had formed over the front of the cabin. She had to take an ax and chop through the ice to get outside. She could see how deep the snow was, so she tied a rope around her waist and one to the doorstep and started out through the drifts toward the barn. She could see that the snow was much too deep and the ice was slick, so with children she didn't dare go any farther than a few yards. She turned around and went back to the cabin. She felt bad for the cow and said a silent prayer that Carl would hurry home this Christmas Eve day.

The day came and the day went. It grew late into the night of Christmas eve. Bess wrote that of all Carls' bad habits...promptness was his very best trait. She knew in her heart that something dreadful must have happened or he would have returned home by now. The children grew cranky and could not understand why their father and their tree had not arrived yet. She wrote she was just about to put them to bed when a knock at the door sent her heart flying. She knew it must be Carl. Her oldest little boy flung the door open. And Bess wrote her heart sank. For there on the other side of the cabin door stood the straggliest old trapper she had ever seen. But to her three little children on Christmas Eve, an old man with a white beard, and a pack on his back and a tree in his hands were certainly welcome. They started to shout, "it's Santa...it's Santa." The trapper must have sensed the fear in Bess for he looked her directly in the eye and said, "Bess don't be afraid. Carl is at Table Rock in the Spaulding's trappers cabin with a lame horse. He couldn't make it any farther tonight. I was out on snowshoes checking my traps and agreed that as long as I was coming this way, I would bring you this pack and this tree and he would be along in the morning."

Bess invited him in and fed him hot stew. He put the tree up and helped the children hang their ornaments. Bess judged him to be a good man, as he could recite the story of the nativity by heart. She put the children to bed. The old trapper brought wood in and milked the cow. She asked him if he

would like to spend the night in the barn. He said that would be good. He told her he didn't have any family and he had very much enjoyed spending this Christmas Eve with her children. She thanked him for his trouble and invited him to join them in the morning for Christmas breakfast. He seemed very happy.

The trapper retired to the barn and this was the first time Bess had been able to look inside Carl's pack. Her heart soared. In the pack were peppermint, chocolate and a beautiful piece of yard goods. Her Christmas would be perfect. She put the pack under the tree with the hand carved horses and the doll house for her little girl that Carl had so carefully carved himself. She then went to bed herself, feeling content knowing Carl was safe and her Christmas was perfect.

The morning came and Bess was caught up in the children's excitement. It was late into the morning when she realized the old trapper had not joined them for Christmas breakfast. By this time her little boy was shouting that he could see his father coming over the hill. They all met him at the door. The children were so excited to tell their father they had their very own Santa Clause locked in the barn. Carl looked perplexed and sent the children into the house. He looked at Bess and asked her who was in the barn. She quickly explained that it was just the old trapper he had sent with the tree and the pack. That she had let him spend the night in the barn to repay him for kindness. Carl looked so puzzled and then he explained. He had never made it to the valley. He had made it as far as Table Rock when the storm hit. He went to the trappers cabin to wait the storm out. When he was tying his horse by the river, he saw an old trapper fall through the mush ice. It took three of them to get him pulled out from under the ice. When they took him into the cabin, they knew he would never make it. So they wrapped him in a blanket and laid him by the fire. The storm had subsided some and they decided to go ahead and try to make it to the valley. The three saddled their horses and started back down the road. Carl said he had only went a few hundred yards when a strange feeling came over him. He could not just go and leave that old man to die alone at Christmas. He sent the "two young bucks" on to the valley and returned to the trappers cabin and to the old man. He told Bess he just kept the fire going and the old man would drift in and out of consciousness. Carl said he told the old trapper about his wife and family and how disappointed they would be that he never made it to the valley to pick up the peppermint, chocolate and little piece of yard goods for Christmas. He told him how much he loved his family and how he looked forward to just being back with them. But for right now they were alone and without a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. The old man died in Carl's arms.

Bess started to cry. The pages in her journal are tear stained as she wrote how she knew that she would find no trapper in the barn. There were no snowshoe tracks in the snow. She told Carl that she thought she had received the greatest blessing on earth...she had been allowed to entertain an angel on Christmas Eve, because Carl had shown such unconditional love of Christ though caring for a dying old trapper on Christmas Eve. There was no trapper in the barn. But she told Carl she had proof he had been there. For in the cabin underneath the Christmas tree was a pack with peppermint, chocolate, and a little piece of yard goods.

She wrapped up the yard goods in white paper and left them to me with a letter telling me never to use the fabric for it was from heaven. She told this story countless times to our family and it has become part of our Christmas tradition.

My great grandmother died when I was six years old on Christmas day.