

# Bertha's Gift

by Craig Clyde

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Winner —“The Christmas I Remember Best”

She was a small, wizened woman with snow white hair and snapping eyes. Her demeanor was usually adversarial and when she straightened up to her full height of four feet ten inches she could be a formidable foe indeed. Bertha Davis was my neighbor — in fact the only neighbor of our ranch in 1955. We never had a telephone nor television set while I was growing up, so neighbors, no matter how argumentative, were meaningful.

My mother and father's Christmas tradition of caroling always included Bertha's place because she was a widow of nearly twenty years and, as my mother said, she needed some cheer on Christmas. I couldn't imagine anyone that cantankerous deserved cheering up.

I always dreaded going to her musty old house full of Yakima Indian relics because she would squeeze my cheek with a gnarled fist of “iron” and request I sing her a special solo —“Oh Come All Ye Faithful.” I was the singer in our family and Bertha Davis said about the only two things worth a “hill-of-beans” in this world was a good Hereford bull and my boy-soprano voice singing that carol.

That year I was seven years old and having grave misgivings about the existence of Santa Claus. My older brother had spared no effort in describing exactly how he'd seen our parents, well after midnight on Christmas Eve, filling our stockings and laying presents under the tree. I desperately still wanted to believe.

That particular Christmas Eve in Toppenish, Washington was one for the record books. Two feet of snow and still falling. It had been a difficult financial year for my father, a cattle rancher with a small spread in Eastern Washington State. He'd had lost a great deal of money the preceding spring on feedlot steers, and hadn't been able to withstand the crushing debt. The three children had been told—in a loving way that left no doubt—Santa wouldn't be visiting our home this year. Mother said he was too busy with children who really needed his visit more than we did but we all knew it was because we just didn't have the money.

We drove up Bertha's driveway in the driving snowstorm. The whole family crammed into that ancient Chevrolet truck which was my father's only vehicle to feed the cattle. After our obligatory carols outside, her door opened and she invited us in, offering us what she offered every year: hot apple cider of her own vintage and toll house cookies.

I slumped back in the corner of the darkened room. Bertha was a notorious tightwad in the tight knit farming community. She never burned more than one light bulb at a time. The story was that she was wealthy and kept all her money in the mattress. I never got to see the mattress.

Dad used to tease me saying, “You are the only one she likes maybe she'll leave all her money to you?” I labored under that childlike belief for years figuring a song could be worth all that money. The old rambling ranch house was dark and musty. I had always

associated the smell with old people — she was in her eighties — but this Christmas Eve I was grateful for the dark, because with her eyesight I thought perhaps I would escape the obligatory solo. It was not to be.

“Come here!”, She commanded. I slunk over to her. “Are you going to sing my favorite?” Here it came, the stinging pinch of the cheek. “Well, are you?” She repeated. “Yes,” I said in a voice just barely above a whisper. She settled herself on the couch as the rest of my family moved back. Mother nodded to me, with that “sing or die” look on her face. I gulped, steadied myself and sang... (Oh Come All Ye Faithful) ...

At seven years old I couldn't really tell if it was good. Bertha cried a little, as she always did—and usually she never cried. I always figured she cried when I sang because I was off-key so badly. Mother said it was because she didn't have any children.

That wasn't exactly true, though. There were stories I had heard about Bertha's daughter. A daughter who had married a man Bertha didn't approve of and the diminutive firebrand had disowned her only child. I never got the courage to ask if that was true. But it was the consensus of nearly everyone in town that it was.

My last note still hung in the air, as she dabbed her eyes. In a moment she was the shrew again, telling my father that he shouldn't have invested in feeder steers as she'd warned and various other opinions about his managing of money, his family and generally his whole life's work. I was more than ready to leave when she pulled me over to her, hugged me mightily for such a small frail soul and asked, “What are you going to get for Christmas, tomorrow?”

“Nothing,” I said glancing at my embarrassed mother, “Santa can't come to our house this year.”

“You still believe in Santa Clause?” She demanded. “You are too old for that fiddle-faddle.” I nodded dumbly that I did. She looked at me for a long time. “He's not coming to your house? Why not?”

“Oh, we just told the children that there are others who are in need more than we are...and Santa will be going there...uh, instead,” my mother said quickly, chagrined at having to explain it at all.

“Fiddlesticks! Santa doesn't miss anyone.” Bertha barked. With that, she “shooed” all of us toward the door. As the rest of the family got in the truck for the snowy ride home, she stopped me, pinched my sore cheek again and did something I had only seen her do once before — she smiled.

The next day, Christmas morning, there under the tree were three presents. One for my brother, my sister...and one for me. I don't recall what my brother and sister received but I got a small red toy cash register. It was the best toy I ever received. That little toy cash register became all sorts of wonderful things to my childish imagination — a space ship control board — a typewriter — a radio to talk with the world—anything and everything a small boy could think of. I asked my mother that morning where it had come from. She just shook her head and said, “Santa decided that maybe you should get something I guess...” We never really spoke of it again.

Years later, long after Bertha had gone to her reward — a reward many in town said would be a shovel and hot coals — I asked mother about the small cash register. “I really don't know,” she told me, “when your father got up to feed the cattle Christmas morning those presents were on the step. No note. Nothing. Just those three presents.”

It was the Christmas I'll always remember best. Bertha, if you're up there listening...and I'm pretty sure you are...tell Santa, thanks.

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### **Biography**

**A native of Washington State, Craig Clyde has been in television and film most of his adult life. After a stint as an English teacher, Clyde began his professional media career in Montana, later moving to Utah. In 1989 he co-formed the film production company, Majestic Entertainment, a Utah-based film corporation. He has written over thirty feature film motion picture scripts and has directed for both features and television — as well as the eleven films which he has written and directed for his own company. The most recent being “Miracle Dogs” which will premiere this fall. Clyde’s first novel was Wind Dancer based his original screenplay. His second is First We Dance a psychological thriller. He has written many magazine and freelance articles as well. He is married and lives with his family in Salt Lake City, Utah.**