

**A
WHITE
CHRISTMAS
IN
COLORADO**

By Mimi Reaves

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COLORADO -- 1976

The Aldridge families were planning to spend Christmas together at the Arroyo Seco cabin. Of course this included Pappy and me. Janie, Bert and their children were to drive up from Los Angeles and meet us there on December 24th.

Pappy was working outdoors on December 10th. Skip stopped by to see us at noon. He laid a packet of papers on our table and said, "Mom, here is yours and Pap's Christmas present from Donna and me." Of course I was curious to open it. To my surprise, it contained two Amtrak tickets to, or from, Denver and two jet tickets, to or from Colorado.

I think I was in shock. I started to say, "We can't go. We already have made plans to celebrate Christmas at the cabin." Then I realized that we could be with our California families most any time. At that point tears filled my eyes.

Skip and Donna knew how much we missed Creston, Vicki and our two little great-granddaughters that had moved to Colorado six months previously. To us it seemed like six years. They also knew that Pappy and I hadn't been on a train for over fifty years and we had never been on a jet airplane.

Skip said, "These trips can be used anytime up to six months, but Donna and I thought that the two of you would like to spend Christmas with the Colorado family. I'm sure they must be somewhat lonesome there, alone." At that point the tears really rolled down my cheeks. I wondered if Donna and Skip fully realized how much we had missed that little family.

Pappy came into the house about that time. I said, "Look, Honey, what Donna and Skip gave us for Christmas." As he looked at the tickets he started to speak, but couldn't. This also took him by surprise. Finally he said, "We can't go. We've already made plans to spend Christmas at the cabin." As soon as he realized that this was a once-in-a-lifetime Colorado gift from our dear kiddies, we both thanked Skip, Donna and God.

We called Lakewood, a suburb of Denver, Colorado and told Cres and Vicki the good news. Vicki and I had often talked about visiting, in our letters, but hardly thought our plans would materialize.

Vicki, Cres and the little girls were so happy to hear the good news. I know they must have started making plans immediately, as did we. To get Pappy to be away from home for more than two days was really something.

Pappy put the tickets away for safe keeping. We were now walking on a beautiful, fluffy cloud. However, when he looked for the tickets to arrange our trip with the travel agency, he couldn't locate them. We looked high and low, over and under, but the tickets were nowhere to be found. After two more days of searching we decided to buy two more sets of tickets. We didn't mention this to Skip and Donna. Just two days before time to leave, we found the tickets. The travel agency refunded our money.

Early in the morning of the 22nd we drove to Santa Clara. From there Bob drove us to the Oakland depot, as we had decided to go by train and return by plane. Bob deposited us safely in the coach and bade us goodbye. It was a different type of train from the old ones of bygone days. Then, it was a steam locomotive.

Amtrak was scheduled to leave Oakland at 9:00 AM. It was 10:00 AM before we left. This all was so exciting! Here we were sitting side-by-side. No worries, no cares, and no traffic to

dodge. Almost like a dream. Now we could really enjoy each other's company. It was hard to re- alize that over fifty years had passed since either of us had been on a train. This was like going on a second honeymoon.

I had visions of us speeding along so fast on this modern train, pulled by power- ful diesel-electric engines. Instead, we were barely moving, so it seemed. I guess I was in a hurry to get to Colorado. I asked the conductor why we were traveling so slowly. He informed me that it was impossible to move any faster over the Sierra-Nevada Mountains. As it was, there were two engines pulling the cars. He said that the fastest we could travel going up- grade was between 15 and 20 miles per hour, but when we reached the plains we would make up for lost time.

There was definitely a great advantage in slowly climbing the high Sierras. We could drink in the beauty of the majestic, snow-capped mountains. Pappy and I were so relaxed. We almost had to pinch ourselves to make sure this wasn't Fairyland. I had prepared a little box lunch for our noon

meal. We got a cup of hot coffee from the dining car.

By the time we reached Reno, Nevada it was dark. The glamorous town sparkled with brilliant lights. Some passengers got off there and others boarded the train. The stop was very short. Soon we were again on our way. Now it was too dark to see the beauty of the landscape.

We had a fairly late dinner that night in the dining car. We ate at a table with another couple. The meal was good but quite expensive. When we returned to our seats, the conductor brought us a soft, white pillow -- one for Pappy and one for me. It felt good to relax, talk and doze.

After the train descended the Sierras the speed was increased. It was so warm and comfortable in the car, regardless of the freezing temperature outside. Pappy seemed to enjoy the relaxation of not hav- ing to do the driving, as usual. I brought a heavy coat with me which served as a blanket for us both. We didn't sleep soundly. The rails were click-clacking under us as we sped across the Nevada and Utah plains.

Breakfast in the dining car tasted good. There wasn't much choice, however. We had orange juice, rolls and coffee. I had left my red, crocheted cap on the seat of the traintrain, with my pillow. When we re- turned from breakfast my cap had disappear- ed.

As we looked out the car window, all the growth we could see was frozen and white. Even the bare trees had icicles hanging from them.

It was so comfortable and warm in the car. We read and conversed, and met sever- al nice people across the isle from us. However, the temperature in our car was getting uncomfortably warm by noon time. I mentioned this to the conductor. He said, "Be thankful for it. Look outside. Every- thing is frozen stiff." He really wasn't very congenial. I was so warm that I felt it would be a relief to step outside on the icy ground.

We crossed the Salt Lake Flats of Utah, then on up through part of Wyoming. We had sandwiches and cold drinks for lunch just as we crossed the Continental Divide. We stopped at Rawlins for a short time and then on to Medicine Bow and Laramie. The pull over the Laramie mountains was far less difficult for the train than if we had crossed the Rocky Mountains.

By now we were sweltering from the heat in the car. There were only a few passen- gers left in our coach besides us. When we went for a drink of water, there was none. For hours we had to buy soft drinks to quench our thirst. When necessary to go to the toilet there was no water to flush it. We were told not to use them unless abso- lutely necessary. When we asked the reason for the lack of water, the only response we got was, "We can't take on any water until we reach Cheyenne. Make the best of it."

We finally reached Cheyenne around 5:00 PM. After a short stop there, we started to back up. I thought we were going to turn around or side-switch to let another train pass. About that time the conductor passed through our car saying, "We will be traveling backwards until we reach Denver." He had to be kidding! He definitely was not! The whole train continued in reverse from Cheyenne, Wyoming to Denver, Colorado.

Our seat was facing the wrong way, as were all the others. I started to get car sick so I stood in the open section of our car for the rest of the trip.

What a great relief it was to see the lights of the Denver station. There were very few people left to disembark from the cars. The station wasn't illuminated as much as I thought it would be. However, Pappy and I could hardly wait to plant our feet on Colorado soil, or Denver terra-firma.

Now we would meet our dear little family. We knew that they must be as anxious to see us as we were to see them. But ... where were they? Pappy walked from one end of the train to the other. No kiddies in sight. It was now 7:00 PM. We decided to look for them inside the depot station. To our amazement, there were no other people in the large waiting room. The long rows of pew-like seats were deserted. Where was our little family? Pappy suggested that I sit down while he looked around outside.

Suddenly I heard little footsteps approaching at a very fast pace. Four little arms grabbed me and circled around my neck. Oh how precious and how loving that greeting was. Those two little tots seemed just as happy to see me as I was to see them. We kissed, hugged, squeezed and embraced over and over again. Little Tammi was 5-1/2 years and baby Tina Jean was 2-1/2 years old.

Shortly behind them came Cres, Vicki and Pappy. They couldn't keep up with the little girls. It was so, so wonderful to see and embrace Vicki and Cres again. The dear little girls also gave Pappy the lovely welcome that they gave me. Even though it had only been six months since we last saw our little family, it seemed like six years.

We had visions of the six of us crowding into their little Datsun pickup. We had a nice surprise when Cres drove up to the front of the station in their new car. Though a used car, it was so pretty and comfortable in which to ride.

By now it was past eight o'clock. Everyone was hungry. Cres had a favorite fast-food place called "The Burger King." We decided to eat there. The hamburgers really were extra good. (That was before Burger King made its debut in California.)

Cres' and Vicki's home was located a few miles from Denver. It seemed like fifty miles. I was so anxious to get there. As we drove up to 3354 South Flower Street, Lakewood, Colorado, we felt as though we had visited there before. Vicki's letter descriptions and locations were so accurate. The inside of their home was lovely. They always had a knack for putting homey touches to their dwellings. The large Christmas tree in the living room was beautifully decorated. It was a most exciting site and really put us in the Christmas spirit.

After visiting for a couple of hours and indulging in some goody snacks, we were all ready for bed. Vicki and Cres had moved into another bedroom so we could have their king-size bed. Bless them! We slept like two logs.

Fairly early the next morning two little Sweethearts crawled into bed with us. Vicki brought us each a hot cup-o-coffee. So good! The day being December 24th, there were things to do and plans to make. It was a busy day for all.

Little Tammi sang us the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," while looking at the picture book. We, Pappy and I, thought she was so smart reading the words, but she had memorized them from the pictures. When she came to the "eleven-lords-a-leaping," she said, "eleven-lords-a-leaking." We all started laughing. She couldn't understand what was so funny. Bless her heart!

After a luscious dinner that Vicki prepared, Cres and Pappy went to town to purchase two little baskets for the handlebars of the two little bicycles that Cres and Vicki had bought for the little girls as Christmas gifts.

Santa Clause left some gifts to be opened on Christmas Eve. Such an exciting time. We had been looking forward to a White Christmas, but so far there was no snow in sight for us. Just before we retired, Vicki called us to the window. The snow was falling gently. We were so excited. We were going to have a White Christmas after all.

Christmas morning, quite early, the two little girls came in to awaken us. They were beaming with excitement and joy. Santa had been there again and left more presents. We had such a happy time watching Tammi and Tina open their gifts. They were so excited. Last, but not least, Santa brought them each a new bicycle. They both squealed with joy and delight.

Vicki and Cres, together, had made us a darling needle-point fruit basket laden with fruits, on a white background. The wooden frame around it nestled on an easel stand. This meant more to us than any gift they could possibly buy. There was love in every stitch. To this day, we still have it sitting on a little table in the living room. A happy, happy memento of my first White Christmas!

Vicki and Cres did a beautiful job preparing the Christmas turkey. Our dinner was extra good. So many luscious dishes and yummy deserts. The table was decorated so pretty with Christmas motifs and bright, red candles.

It turned out to be a real White Christmas for us. The ground, trees and shrubbery were covered with snow. We played beautiful Christmas music most of the day. My very first White Christmas! Pappy had enjoyed such in Indiana -- years ago.

Of course the girls had to try their new bikes. Several spills in the soft snow did not phase them. Cres, Pappy and the girls built a huge snow man, almost life size. What fun we all had together!

That evening Cres drove us to Denver to see the beautiful Nativity and Christmas scenes at the State Capitol and Civic Center. Along with the lovely lighting effects, it made a lasting impression in my memory. So, so beautiful! We drove past the Denver Mint which also was glowing with Christmas lights.

Cres had a few days off from work and the girls had Christmas vacation. We really made the best of it. Vicki and Cres must have made plans ahead as each day the family took us on a lovely sight-seeing trip.

We visited the beautiful Red Rock Park near Denver. The soil and rocks were very red in color. (When Cres and Vicki returned to California they brought us a sack of red dirt from the park and a lovely red-dish-colored planter.) Each year Easter Sunrise Services are held in the amphitheater at Red Rock Park. I'm sure it must be a very impressive service in such a pretty and unique setting. While we were there, the snow started to fall. Even though it wafted down so gently, it wasn't long before the red ground was covered with white snow.

When we arose the next morning, the radio news stated that Evergreen Lake was frozen. We lost no time in fixing a nice lunch and then heading for the lake in Evergreen, Colorado. The girls were very excited as they now were going to try ice skating for the first time. After Cres and

Vicki rented and put on their skates, they outfitted the girls with the same. Cres took Tina on the ice. Apparently he had been ice skating before. I'm not sure about Vicki. I couldn't decide if Vicki was helping Tammi to skate, or vice-versa. They both sat on the ice occasionally. Pappy and I sat on a cold bench along the sidelines. Brrr, it was so cold. However, we had lots of fun and laughs watching them. Too, there were some professional skaters on the lake and many not so good. In all, we were there less than two hours. The hot coffee and hot drinks we had in the car really "hit the spot."

This trip to Evergreen Lake, though cold and icy, left a beautiful warm memory with us. The mountains, and the trees with their snow-covered branches, were a sight to behold. We drove through a large area of the Rockies, marveling at the winter scenery. We ate our lunch in the car, parked in an area of beautiful winter- wonder-land. On our return to Denver, we had a delicious dinner at Royal Forks Restaurant. We all were very hungry.

On Vicki's birthday, December 28th, Cres drove us all to Lookout Mountain in Denver County. Here we visited Bill Cody's (Buffalo Bill's) memorial museum and grave sight. What an appropriate place for Bill Cody's resting place -- overlooking the vast terrain of his living days. We took pictures of us all, at this point.

The museum was very interesting. What impressed me most was the huge picture of his white horse, "King." This large picture on the further wall greeted us as we entered the museum. (The reason this impressed me was that Buffalo Bill visited Watsonville, California when I was five years old. He and King were on a show boat on Lake Watsonville. My Papa and I stood on the old, covered, wooden bridge that crossed the Pajaro River. From there we watched Buffalo Bill give his horse a drink from a tin cup and from his hat. I thought that was so funny.)

From there we drove around through more beautiful mountains. So many interesting places to see. Cres was a wonderful guide. We ate Vicki's birthday dinner at the Bonanza Restaurant that night. How happy we were to be with Vicki on her birthday. It was such a lovely day to remember.

We really made the best of Cres' time off from work. The drive through the Golden, Colorado country was delightful. He pointed out many interesting places. We also saw the large Coors plant near Golden, Colorado.

One night we had a delicious fish dinner at John Silver's Fish Restaurant. However, none of the dinners compared to the good and tasty dinners that Vicki so lovingly prepared for us. Such a good cook!

After Cres returned to his work, Vicki drove us around. There were so many interesting places to see in the time that we had to spend there. We had fun shopping. One place that was very interesting was called "Cinderella City," in Littleton, Colorado. There Pappy bought me a lovely pair of gold earrings at a store called "The Denver." Vicki helped to select them. While they were shopping, the two girls and I had fun in "Toyland." Santa was a jolly old fellow! We also visited Sears store. Vicki bought Tammi a nice, warm coat for school.

One afternoon we spent at a city park in Lakewood, off of Bear Creek Road. Pappy and the girls had so much fun feeding and chasing the ducks on the ice. The little frozen pond was ideal for shoe skating. A great sport and so much jollity! Of course the swings, play bars and wheels contributed to the fun day.

We usually drove to Denver in the late afternoons to pick up Cres from work. Bless him! He was always so happy when he could join us. The evenings that we spent together in their dear, little home rang with the Christmas spirit of love.

The memorable and happy ten days passed much too fast for Pappy and me. If the Aldridge family tired of us, they certainly didn't show it. Cres and Vicki were very hospitable and gracious, and made us feel as though we were "very special people."

We spent New Year's Eve at home together. At midnight we "toasted" the New Year with a little glass of wine and sparkling cider. We all thanked God for His blessings and love. In our hearts there was a pang of loneliness as this was our last night together before leaving for California and home.

Alas, the day arrived, January 1, 1977, when we had to bid our loved ones farewell. The four of them drove Pappy and me to the large, Denver airport. I'm sure that I wasn't the only person that had lumps in their throats and tears in their eyes as we kissed goodbye.

We all watched the jet -- United Airlines plane; 727 "Friendship" -- taxi up to the indoor ramp (Flight 647). Cres escorted us to our seats, numbers 13-E and -F, directly over the plane's right wing. As I previously said, this was the very first jet ride for both Pappy and me and very exciting. Thirteen was our lucky number.

As we taxied down the airstrip, we could see Cres, Vicki, Tammi and Tina running down the walkway on the other side of the terminal, waving and following us as far as they could go. Of course, it was impossible for them to see us waving back to them -- or could they? Hopefully, they could.

Shortly after the plane left the ground, I got a queezy feeling in my stomach. That was due to the fact that the pilot had to attain 35,000 feet very rapidly in order to clear the high, snow-capped Rockies. What a thrill this was! Such marvels of nature and of mankind's technology. We soon discovered that by sitting directly over the wing, we felt less air current. I took pictures from the window. Before we realized it we were over the Great Salt Lake in Utah. It looked like a fish pond below.

We were served a nice lunch but I was more interested in the scenery far below us. Unfortunately, the clouds obscured our vision over the beautiful Sierras.

Our plane stopped in San Francisco to deposit passengers and refuel. Only two hours in the air before we landed at the San Jose airport. Bob, Janet and kiddies were there to welcome us home. They were a most pleasing sight to us.

When we arrived at their house we phoned Cres and Vicki. It seemed that we had no sooner said "goodbye" to them before we were now saying "hello" over the phone. To me, it seemed almost unbelievable that air travel is so condensed. It took us thirty-six hours to reach Denver by train and only two hours to return by plane.

Our dear Jan had a lovely New Year's dinner awaiting us at their home on our return. We thank God daily for our precious families.

To Skip and Donna, no words can express the gratitude that we hold in our hearts for making this memorable Christmas trip possible for us. God bless you both, and God bless all.

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