



Holiday Caroling

One of my family's most special holiday memories is of our annual caroling party. For about a dozen years, we gathered a bunch of friends together to carol in our little neighborhood at the top of Summit Street.

Our annual caroling party was a dessert potluck. Yes, that was the culinary highlight, but since people cannot subsist on sweets alone, Barry and I provided three different homemade soups. The soups varied from year to year except for one - our son Zack loved having navy bean soup at the caroling party, and so it became a little food tradition. We also served up homemade breads, cheeses, and hot cider. Everybody else brought desserts, and lots of them!

People arrived dressed for serious winter. They'd take off all their layers and make their way upstairs to the living room and dining room. They chose from a random collection of bowls and mugs to fill with soup and cider. After they loaded their plates with hummus and cheese and bread or rice crackers, we'd gather in the living room.

Barry, always the camp director, would hand out little homemade caroling booklets. Then he'd direct us in a sing-through of the carols, particularly the more unusual ones like "Bring the Torch, Jeannette Isabella." There was also one carol that we kept on the list for years and years, though none of us could really sing it. Still, we'd give it a go in the living room every year just to

see if one of our guests miraculously knew it. You see, every caroling party had a different collection of people. There were two exceptions to the varying guest list. The first exception was Charlie Doheny and Cate Decker, our current next-door Philmont neighbors, who came every year. Fun fact - they weren't living in Philmont for any of the caroling parties! The other "regular" family was from our homeschooling community, the Fays of Chatham. We always scheduled the annual event with the Fays and Cate and Charlie before inviting others. That way, we had a small core of singers even if no one else could make the day we chose or flu season started early.

When we were done rehearsing, Barry and I would clear up the soups and get the desserts all ready for our return. Then, everybody would wrap up in layers and layers – and I mean layers - because caroling involves standing still in the cold more than moving around.. We'd gather our flashlights and lanterns. Barry, armed with a hurricane lamp, was always out at the head of the pack. I often took up the rear to keep eyes out for rogue children and other strays. One year, I hung at the back to accompany a very pregnant friend who needed to take her time that night.

Once we got outside, Barry led us to different neighbors' homes. We always went into the Union Court cul-de-sac where the Ostrandens live and caroled for every house where people were home. Then we headed down Summit Street, sometimes as far as the Hoppe's house. While it really is romantic and fun to carol, you get cold in a shorter time than you'd think. And we often had young children with us, too, who could only handle so much.

While there was pretty music on Summit Street on caroling nights, there was also another sound. Every so often you could hear the cry of "Car!!" passed down through the group like a relay baton. Mini-mob that we were, we tended to spill into the street. It was important to have that safety signal on upper Summit Street.

One of the best parts of this annual tradition was that it was not only ours. People in the other houses waited for us every year. We'd stand outside their doors and sing two or three carols. We'd vary the carols so that they'd get a more lyrical one and an upbeat one. The harmonies were always heartfelt and were sometimes good, but everyone enjoyed the singing and the community. One year, Joe Krein even invited the whole group into his personal Elvis shrine-museum. We sat down in the 50's style "diner" in his basement. Everybody gratefully sipped cocoa and gaped at the Elvis memorabilia all around us.

When numbness in our toes and fingers told us that we were done caroling, we'd head back home and feast on the dessert potluck. The table was always full of different desserts, like an overflowing bakery case. From decadent treats with all the fixin's to gluten-free, sugar-free and dairy-free options, we had cookies, pies, tarts, cakes, macaroons, sweet breads, nut brittles, truffles, and sometimes something healthy, too. Then everyone would hang out and talk and eat. And overeat. Sometimes the kids would run upstairs to play. As they got older, they sprawled in the living room by the fire, talking.

The caroling party was a tradition that we all loved. We aren't exactly sure why we stopped doing it, other than life. Getting too busy. No one knows, really. But it's a tradition that I dearly enjoyed remembering about as I've written down this memory. Who knows, maybe this will inspire us to revive a holiday tradition beloved by our family and our little part of Philmont.

By Jeri Burns