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Whatever Happened to Christmas?

By LeAnn R. Ralph

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Remember when no one started Christmas shopping until after Thanksgiving?

Wisconsin author LeAnn R. Ralph remembers it very well.

"When I was growing up on our dairy farm forty years ago, the stores didn't put up Christmas displays until the day after Thanksgiving. No one was really thinking about Christmas shopping before that," Ralph said. "In fact, my mother felt so strongly about it that she didn't even like to hear the word 'Christmas' until after we had finished eating Thanksgiving dinner."

Ralph's new book, *Christmas In Dairyland (True Stories From a Wisconsin Farm)*, celebrates Christmas during that simpler time.

"Back then, happiness was baking cookies, decorating the Christmas tree, and eating lefse that my mother had made," Ralph said.

Lefse (pronounced lef'suh) is a flat potato pastry brought to this country by Norwegian immigrants who settled in Wisconsin. Ralph's mother was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants, and their 120-acre family farm was homesteaded by Ralph's great-grandfather.

"When I was a kid, people enjoyed simple pleasures. The Sunday school Christmas program was an event at the little country church just down the road from our farm that was attended by nearly everyone in the neighborhood," Ralph noted.

"At the time, if someone had told me the Christmas season was going to change so drastically that you would eventually get Christmas catalogs in the mail in August and September — and that you would find Christmas decorations on sale in August and September, too — I wouldn't have believed it," she said.

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"I also would have never thought that dairy farming would change so much. I always took it for granted that we lived in 'America's Dairyland,' but today, most of the small family dairy farms have disappeared," Ralph noted.

According to statistics from the United States Census of Agriculture , Wisconsin has lost two-thirds of its dairy farms since 1969. Forty years ago, Wisconsin had 60,000 dairy farms. Today, only about 20,000 dairy farms remain.

Nation-wide statistics from the United States Census of Agriculture show the same trend. In 1969, more than a half a million dairy farms operated in the United States. Today, only about 80,000 dairy farms remain.

"As far as I was concerned, one of the best parts of Christmas was going out with my dad to cut a

Christmas tree. We had small stands of pine trees planted around the farm to stop soil erosion. We would walk around until we found a nice tree, and then we would cut it and bring it home," Ralph recalled.

Ralph's book, *Christmas In Dairyland (True Stories From a Wisconsin Farm)* (August 2003; ISBN1-59113-366-1 ; trade paperback; 153 pages), features 20 stories set on her family's farm during the Christmas season. Story titles include "The Lefse Connection," "Milkweed Pods and Poinsettias," "Wintergreen," "White Christmas," "Jeg Er Sa Glad Hver Julekveld," "The Most Perfect Toboggan," "A Candle for Christmas," and "A New Year Unlike Any Other." The book also includes recipes for lefse, fattigman (a Norwegian cookie, pronounced 'futti-mun'), julekake, and Christmas cookies, as well as instructions for making candles out of old crayons, as featured in the story "A Candle for Christmas."

"Several years ago a story of mine about my dad making ice cream was published in an e-mail newsletter. The title of the story was 'Dad's Favorite Recipe,' and for several weeks after that I received e-mails asking for the recipe. That's why I decided to include recipes in the book for some of the foods mentioned in my stories," Ralph explained.

Ralph earned an undergraduate degree in English with a writing emphasis from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and also earned a Master of Arts in Teaching from UW-Whitewater. She taught English at a boys' boarding school for several years and worked as a newspaper reporter for more than eight years. She is a freelance writer for two weekly newspapers in west central Wisconsin and is the editor of the Wisconsin Regional Writer, the quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Assoc.

For more information about *Christmas In Dairyland (True Stories From a Wisconsin Farm)*, visit

The book also can be ordered through any brick-and-mortar bookstore.

LeAnn R. Ralph is the editor of the Wisconsin Regional Writer (the quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Assoc.) and is the author of the book, *Christmas In Dairyland (True Stories From a Wisconsin Farm)* (Aug. 2003); trade paperback. For more information about Christmas

In Dairyland, visit

What Do You Want This Year?

By Angie Dixon

Christmas is all around us, and many people are making up wish lists. Those who aren't doing that are busy setting down their New Year's Resolutions already. But this is a good time to sit down and do some serious introspection.

What do you want from the holidays this year? Do you want to rush around, spend a lot of money you don't have, and yell at the kids for not playing with all twenty of the toys they asked for—at the same time? Is that really how you want to spend Christmas?

We talk about "Christmas spirit," and mostly we mean giving. Giving of ourselves, giving to people who need it. That's great, that's Christmas spirit.

But I think there's another aspect to "Christmas spirit." I think it's spiritual. And don't close your screen on me because I said spiritual. I didn't say religious, because it's not. I think it comes from our souls.

I think deep down, each of us has a spirit that wants to be expressed. And I think at Christmas, when we're naturally thinking of others, that spirit is more easily expressed. I think if you want to, you can have a spiritual Christmas. You can feel loving, caring, generous. You can feel like a kid at Christmas, just by opening up to your spirit.

So what do you want this year?

Angie Dixon helps small business owners get their acts together. She is a personal development coach specializing in helping people integrate their home and work lives so they feel less stretched and more balanced. Get her FREE EBOOK on balance at

. For questions or

to discover how coaching can change your life, contact Angie at

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