

Memories of Long Ago

By Pete Clark

Christmas of 1947 was a bit lean in our small, rented house in Hartville, Wyoming. Earlier that year, we were involved in a head-on collision with a truck hauling a combine, near Lingle. My dad would have lost his left arm, but for a pioneering orthopedic surgeon at Natrona County Memorial Hospital in Casper. The doctor used grafted bone, pins, screws and silver wire to rebuild radius and ulna in dad's arm. My brother suffered severe damage to his right arm. I do not know where the money for sustaining our lives came from that winter. I still remember the bushel basket of fruit, nuts and hard candy, delivered to us by the United Mine Workers Local.

We had no Christmas tree that year, as my dad always took my brother and me into the surrounding hills to cut down a scrub cedar to be decorated. That Christmas, he might have been able to chop down a tree, but he would not have been able to load it onto the top of our car to get it home. Even in good times he did not have much money. While going through things, preparing to move to Windsor Gardens, I found a mid-1940s pay slip from the CF&I iron mine at Sunrise, the mine that fed the blast furnaces in Pueblo. The piece of paper said he was paid thirty-five cents per hour in 1947. In the year 2020 that equals \$4.18 per hour. I was amazed at that niggardly rate of pay for a skilled worker who regularly set up and detonated the equivalent of a boxcar load of dynamite. It finally dawned on me why my dad made the eagle on the back side of a quarter scream, in pain, due to being held so closely.

In 1949 dad decided he had breathed in enough of the potentially lethal silicon particles from the underground dust of hard rock mining and accepted a job as a government hunter in Fremont County, Wyoming. There were few, if any scrub cedars in the area where we lived, so dad at last had to purchase our holiday trees. When uranium mining emerged in the Gas Hills circa 1954, dad began working with explosives in an open pit uranium mine.

As Wyoming's uranium mining began to fizzle, dad joined the I.B.E.W. and began helping build power transmission lines. He became one of the three top construction explosive experts in the Intermountain West. He never lacked for work. Upon retirement, he had the finances to enjoy trips to Shrine events and to help raise money for the Shrine Hospitals. He sponsored several children who needed the services of the Shrine Hospital in Salt Lake City and he had no worries about Christmas trees, as his need for them had evaporated into the distant past. My dad passed away Christmas Eve, 1983.

I miss the trips into the hills to get the trees. I miss the aroma of cedar in the living room. I miss the colorful hard candy in various shapes, like ribbons, peanuts and berries. But most of all, I miss my dad.