

Annie's Christmas Sled

Written By: Harry Gribnitz

Growing up as the only son of the manager of a toy department could have easily caused me to become rather spoiled. My Dad was the Manager or Buyer of the Toy Department for the Marshall Field's State Street store for most of my youth. I had toys that other children never saw. Often these were vendor's samples that needed to be "tested" by someone to be sure kids would enjoy the new toy. I was lucky enough to get to "test" many new items.

As soon as I was old enough, I started spending my Christmas school vacation with my Dad at work. I was assigned any task that might help a customer have a Merry Christmas. I would retrieve items from the stockroom, assemble those "some assembly required" items and carry packages to the customer's car. One of my favorite jobs was to entertain a boy or girl by showing them the department's magnificent electric train display, while their parents shopped.

My Dad was a master at turning an angry customer into one filled with Christmas cheer. He really believed in the Christmas spirit and the store's policy that the customer was always right. He tried to instill some of the same in me. It was not by what he said to me but simply by watching him live the Spirit of the Season.

One Christmas Eve, my Dad received a phone call from a Grandmother in a northern suburb. She had purchased a Flexible Flyer for her granddaughter for Christmas but it had arrived damaged. (For those of you too young to remember a Flexible Flyer is a sled made from wood with flexible metal runners made for steering.) Her Granddaughter, Annie was coming over that evening with her Mom to open presents. She needed a new sled and someone to do the assembly. Annie's Dad was serving in Vietnam so he was not around to help. My Dad located a Flyer in the Old Orchard Store, but they didn't have anyone who could do the delivery and assembly. I gathered a few hand tools and just caught the van for its last trip to Old Orchard. The van driver dropped me at Grandma's house on his way home in his car. We loaded the damaged sled into his car. He wished everyone a Merry Christmas as he headed home to his family for Christmas Eve.

I set about the task of assembling the Flyer. I was just finishing as Annie and her Mom arrived. We just had time to place it, unwrapped, under the tree before they arrived. Annie squealed with delight as she spotted the wooden Flexible Flyer with its bright red runners. She had to go out on the hill behind the house to try it out. This was the same hill that her dad had used years earlier to hone his sledding skills. I was recruited, very willingly, to help Annie learn how to use her new sled. I gave my parents a call to let them know I would be late. They said they would wait for me to open our family presents.

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The four of us spent the next hour in sheer joy, as we all had to try that awesome sled. Tired and covered with snow, we headed inside to enjoy some hot chocolate. After warming myself with the hot beverage, I head to the bus stop. It took two bus transfers and two "L" train rides to get home. When I finally got home, I related the story of Annie and her sled. When asked why I was so late getting home, I simply said, "Since her Dad wasn't their, someone had to help Annie with her new sled." As he hugged me, I think that was the only time I remember seeing my Dad cry.

Merry Christmas,

Harry Gribnitz

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PS: In keeping with another Christmas tradition, I have made a contribution in the name of my friends and clients to The Santa Claus Girls. Since 1908, The Santa Claus Girls have provided toys, books, clothing and other gifts to Grand Rapids-area children who otherwise might not receive Christmas presents. If you would like to make a contribution, it may be sent to Santa Claus Girls, c/o The Grand Rapids Press, 155 Michigan St. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 or call 616-222-5796 for more information.