

# DePuy's Views

## Chestnuts Roasting...

by Dr. Hadley S. DePuy

It's late Thanksgiving afternoon and the only people in the house not sound asleep as a result of a turkey coma are my two grandsons, Luis and Johnny, and myself. The talk turns to Christmas. I was left alone to try to answer the myriad questions raised by these curious six and eight-year-olds. Johnny got right to the heart of the matter. "Grandpa, I know that you lived in olden times, but was there a Christmas when you grew up. And, by the way, Grandpa, what does it mean 'chestnuts roasting on an open fire'? What are chestnuts? And what does it mean to 'open fire'?"

Well, John, you ask difficult questions. Let me dodge the answers by saying that there was not only a Christmas, but all of us celebrated it in the little village of Ellenville, New York, in which I grew up. The best way I can tell you about my Christmases long ago is to take you back there by telling you a story of what it was like long ago. Luis added, "Please don't start 'Once upon a time'."

The boys seemed interested, so I began my story.

It's mid-December 50 years ago, and I am driving a 1949 Studebaker down the **Main Street** hill heading to my family home. I'm back for the Christmas holidays from Colgate University, and I plan to be with old friends. One could see out the frosted windows the stores and homes resplendent with lights and decorations.

After leaving my worldly possessions at home, I was off to the business district to see what was going on. Nothing had changed. People walking down the streets were greeting each other and sharing holiday cheer. Shops were filled with helpful clerks and excited customers. Folks shopping in Ellenville often did so out of loyalty to shop keepers who were their neighbors and friends.

In those days before TV, children spent the holidays out of doors while riding sleds, ice skating, and throwing snowballs at anything that moved.

We began the next day by going to *Cohen's Bakery* to buy morning pastry. This was a traditional trip my father and I (and later my sons and I) made when I was home. The next stop was *Richie's* to pick up the latest gossip and morning paper. On the way, Police Chief Frank Groppe

stopped to give us a hard time.

Good haircuts were important so a stop at *Ed & Al's Barber Shop* was a necessity. Later, after an ice cream sundae at *Bessie's Sweet Shoppe*, we stopped by Sid and Al *Sinick's* store next door to buy some gum. My **Canal Street** sojourn ended after greeting "Pinkie" Matthews in his drugstore and giving his best wishes to the Finklestein brothers whose store on **Market Street** was open all the time, like today's Wal-Mart.

Boys, I think back on those people, I can't help reflecting that the Ellenville of that Christmas long ago was made up of mostly common people who just wanted to go about their lives. There were a few "town characters," but mostly people were steady, concerned, respectful, responsible, religious, and of good character. We knew each other, were tolerant of different races, religions, and backgrounds, respected diversity and our elders. We were not perfect, but we knew that, and that was good enough.

Too soon the holidays were over, and many of us headed away from Ellenville to pursue our dreams for the future. Tears were shed as we drove up the **Main Street** hill heading

out of town. All has changed since those Christmas days of long ago and what I'm telling you is but a memory for a few of us.

I have never forgotten what gifts the people of Ellenville were to me just by being in my life as I grew up. My parents, our family, my friends and their parents, our neighbors, the townspeople, teachers, police, the shop keepers – they mean as much as any holiday gift I have received. John listened intently, then said "I guess everything about Christmas and Ellenville has changed since the olden times?"

"Two things haven't changed over the years," I replied. "Christmas is still a time of hope and joy. And my Ellenville and all the other hometowns have never been about buildings, only about people," I said.

In the background, I could hear the others up and around after coming out of their turkey stupor. "The folks are up and we'll have to talk more later, Johnny," I announced. As we broke up our conversation and I gave the boys a hug, my Christmas wish for John and Luis is that they will have the same wonderful recollections of a Christmas time in their hometown filled with joy and warm memories... recollections to pass on to those who follow. 



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