

Lament for Xmas dinners past

We're a day away from the one that for me - until my age hit double figures - was once the most marvellous 24 hours of the year. For the following 55 years, it's been less so, but we'll get to that.

It was wonderful for me as a kid growing up in New Plymouth in post WW II years, because it was a seemingly uncomplicated occasion when your worth as a small but valued human being was confirmed by parents and another person whose provenance was wrapped in as much tinsel as a Christmas cracker.

Santa undoubtedly exists. He must do, because somebody always ate the Xmas cake and emptied the bottle of DB bitter left on the hearth on Christmas eve. It was never there in the morning.

And we met him once. The fact he arrived in the same red van as the one owned by Mr Orr up the road escaped our willingly suspended scrutiny, as did the flexibility of his beard as it lifted to make way for the beer glass proffered by Dad.

For me, the build-up was the biggest thing. Xmas cards would start to arrive in the post and be strung above the fireplace.

Sending out ours was a military operation guided by a list that morphed constantly, depending on whose cards turned up each year. There was panic if one arrived from someone not on the list.

I was into decorations. One year I stuck so many streamers of coloured crepe paper above my bed it looked like a four-poster out of Dickens. I'm not sure to this day if it was an accident when my brother chucked a book over to me and it brought the whole concoction down.

But arguments weren't allowed. We had to be good, or Santa mightn't come. The chores list with its tick-boxes had to be flawless or there would be repercussions.

And on the big day itself, the mood never wavered below elation, because it began with present-opening about 5am - accompanied by Silent Night played endlessly on a tiny, windup plastic carousel on which rode angels (it survives to this day) - and was so elevated by constant feasting that as evening approached everyone sat in a reverie awaiting the Queen's message, by radio.

I don't recall turkey. I have a suspicion that in those days, before the imminent creep of Tegel sheds across the Inglewood countryside, roast chook was still a luxury, and that's what occupied the centre of the dinner table when we sat down at midday for the main feast.

Note the time. It bears great relevance to what later happened in my life of Christmases past.

The first suspicions Santa is a fable came the year we got our bikes - how did he get them down the chimney? Ah well, he has his ways - now eat the rest of your chicken. We let it pass for reasons of strategy, as only the growing mind can conjure.

Even into teenage years, Christmas Day was special. It always seemed to be hot enough for a swim in the afternoon.

Only now do I realise Rosemary McLeod was right when she wrote in her recent Xmas Grinch column that the womenfolk did all the work, while us males revelled in its output and then buggered off when it came to cleaning up.

But Mum didn't seem to mind. This was her time to direct proceedings, and we obeyed without demur.

It all began to unravel the year more than one Mum was involved, the year the natural order of things - that is, the time of day Christmas dinner was to be eaten - was challenged.

We boys were to blame. We had strayed unthinkingly away from family lore and introduced the prospect of what seemed on the surface, to us, to be an extension of the joys of Christmas - more than one stupendous dinner on the same day. With the new in-laws.

It was never the same. Mum would begin the campaign to get her way – a midday dinner - as early as July each year, demanding to know (from us, never the actual in-law other mothers) what the arrangements were to be this Christmas, the "this" implying that the great day was almost upon us and things needed to be set in motion.

These days, we're gun-shy of long-term plans. We have no great expectations of tomorrow. Xmas dinner will probably be an all-day smorgasbord.