

# Reflections on Experiences Abroad

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Volume 1

Article 8

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2022

## Christmas Collage

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### Recommended Citation

Monroe, Susan (2022) "Christmas Collage," *Reflections on Experiences Abroad*: Vol. 1, Article 8.

Available at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/experiences\\_abroad/vol1/iss1/8](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/experiences_abroad/vol1/iss1/8)

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# 6

## Christmas Collage

Susan Monroe

**E**very year I get excited as the humid Arkansas summer gives way to the cooler months of autumn. The leaves turn different shades of the sun and wistfully drop off their branches, readying the trees to be dark gray silhouettes against the soft white snows of winter. When I was growing up in southern Africa, October was called suicide month. In the bush where my parents lived, temperatures could top one hundred and twenty degrees even under the nearest shade tree. The humidity was low, which made the heat more bearable, but added to the cracked, parched condition of that remote area. In November the dryness would be broken by the plummeting rain which signaled the start of the rainy season, and with just enough, but not too much rain, the velvet bugs would come out of the ground. These pinto-bean-sized spiders had backs that looked and felt like bright red velvet and legs that retracted as soon as you picked them up—only to shortly reappear as they crawled around on your hand. Christmastime would not be far behind.

I've always loved Christmas—the music, the decorations, the food. I think when we honor what Christmas is really about—the birth of Jesus Christ—God enables us to enjoy all the festivities of the season. Because God gave His Greatest Gift at Christmas, we can join in the joy of giving. Growing up as a missionary kid who went to boarding school, Christmas also meant the end of the school year, a trip to the big city, and the excitement of going home.

My parents would pick me up, and we'd head off to Harare in our little R4. Since we lived in a war zone, nobody paid attention to speed limits—the faster you drove the less likely you were to be a successful target. We would go out to eat at The Bamboo Inn, snack on Cadbury chocolate, and maybe see a “new” movie on the big

screen. At least once we had to have morning tea-time at Barbours, the closest thing Zimbabwe had to an American department store. They made Danish pastries shaped like pinwheels and covered with luscious lemon sauce and served strong chicory coffee with hot milk. We would shop for Christmas presents for each other, maybe find a new *Peanuts* book from the States, always on the lookout for unique gifts and beautiful curios made within the country.

Home was Sanyati, a mission station sixty miles away from the nearest town. It sported a one hundred-bed hospital, elementary school, high school with dormitories, church, eight homes and six apartments for missionaries, and many Africans' homes. As my dad turned off the main dirt road into the station, the first thing I saw was the hospital chapel window. Lavender periwinkles bordered the front of our house, along with my mom's jalapeno pepper plants. There were beds of marigolds in the front yard, and a banana tree and vegetable garden in the back, right outside the bathroom window. We watered the garden with the bath water we saved in a big metal barrel. The water from the kitchen sink ran directly onto the rose bush that could be seen from the kitchen window. Our dog, Pat, came running to greet us. She had white fur, with a black and brown spot on her back and a dark ring around her naturally stubby tail. When she wanted attention, she limped on one of her paws. Simba, our cat, could be found in my room, rolled up in a ball between the sheet and the thin bedspread, a lump in the bed which meowed when poked.

We would set up our silver, aluminum Christmas tree in the living room, then decorate it with traditional round ornaments—silver, gold, red, and blue ones—with a few oblong bright green ones. A special tinsel ornament went on top. Over the fireplace we hung the felt banner of the manger scene my mom had made. The pie-shaped plastic candy holder with the Christmas mouse on top of it went on the coffee table and the kids' Christmas books were laid out. We had a Christmas card holder made of wire mesh and red velvet ribbon, with two green elves posed on top. Gifts from our American relatives went under the tree.

My mom would get busy in the kitchen making chocolate fudge loaded with pecans, creamy peanut butter fudge, divinity, date nut candy, and a big Texas fruit cake. We always shared homemade treats with the neighboring missionaries and they with us. My dad brought a big stereo system back from Vietnam after his year there during the war. It had a phonograph that could play five LPs one right after the other—

we could hear a pause and a click as one record finished and the next one dropped into position. It also had a large reel-to-reel tape player. We had sacred and secular Christmas music playing non-stop—from Marlene Dietrich singing “The Little Drummer Boy” to Mancini-sounding orchestral arrangements of traditional carols, from “Frosty the Snowman” to “Jesu Bambino”. You could hear the music welcoming you as you walked into our yard, way before you got near our open door.

One of the highlights of the season was going caroling on the lorry, the vehicle that was used to haul mail back and forth to town and pick up groceries twice a week for people on the station. All the missionary families would climb into this long, open-bed truck and go singing to our African neighbors. It was inevitable, since it was the rainy season, that the lorry would get weighted down and stuck in a big mud hole as it meandered down the narrow, dirt roads, and that we’d all have to jump off until the men could push it back out and we could resume our journey.

One year the MKs staged a modern-day version of the Christmas story. Jesus was laid in a cardboard box in the garage of the Holiday Inn. Joseph came in leading Mary on a bicycle, and Mary accidentally dropped Baby Jesus in the box, but we still had the angels, shepherds and wise men. One year the younger children sang “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” holding up my empty *Avon* partridge in a pear tree perfume bottle every time that bird was mentioned, and the youth sang “The Twelve Days After Christmas,” which hilariously told the story of what happened to all the gifts after the lovers had a quarrel.

I look back and realize that my happy childhood memories are blessings from God, and that He graciously gives us opportunities in each year to make new memories while we remember the old ones with joy. But I still miss the velvet bugs.

### **About the Author**

Susan Monroe is a piano accompanist in the School of Fine Arts Division of Music at Ouachita Baptist University.