

WHEN NEW YEAR'S WAS STILL CELEBRATED AT HOME

The Philadelphia Inquirer

31 December 2015

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Growing up in a big family, we knew no New Year's celebrations outside the home. Rather than subject a sitter, even a family member, to handle many children during this night, our parents thought it best to have the party in their home.

Fortunately for them, they had a built-in team of servants to help entertain. While we were used to doing chores, in getting ready for the New Year's bash there seemed to be more windows, blinds, floors, carpeting, steps, landings, and overall more furnishings. In our father's terms, everything in the home would "get the white-glove test," and everything must be spick and span.

A favorite chore was waxing the linoleum kitchen floor. The project began when an older brother went into the basement and brought up an industrial-size floor buffer. We heard it was a hand-me-down from the hospital where my father was a physician.

The young children knew to run upstairs and put on a pair of thick socks. They waited on the back steps, every so often asking: "Mark, is the floor done yet?" When he gave the OK, the young children rushed to the floor and began to slip and slide, and twist and jerk, and carry on every which way to get every spot of the linoleum floor buffed.

One of the most menial jobs, reserved for the youngest siblings, was taking the coats of the guests at the front door. We whisked the coats up to our mother and father's bed and hoped for a tip on the return from our good aunts and uncles and parents' friends.

Becoming part of the actual party was an evolution. At the earliest stage, you stayed up until about 9 or 10 p.m, after which you were summarily dismissed to bed. We went begrudgingly but knew we would soon sneak down to the mid-level landing of

the front steps to get a view of the large foyer, which was a high-traffic area. We took delight in spotting who was who and giggled trying to guess what each guest was drinking. Once in a while, someone would spot us and wave hello. We moved back when it was an older sibling, as we could be exposed for encroachment.

As you got older, you graduated to dressing up and staying up until midnight, but each stage meant a change of jobs. The more liberating job during the party was helping with the food serving. In this station, you still reported back to our mother and were never idle, in fear of being sent back upstairs with the younger kids. The problem was that the older ones took liberties with the younger ones and would easily boss them around. As my mother said: "Whenever I give a job to one of the kids, she goes out and gets an assistant; everyone needs an assistant!"

The job with the most responsibility was getting a drink for a guest from the bar. You got to see glasses that you would not see all year. These were "Mother's good, star-cut glasses," and you did not want to break one, fearing some ancestral curse.

There was a room for everyone's pleasure on New Year's. Quiet discussion or a chess game took place in our father's library. The living room was packed with older couples getting reacquainted with those they had not seen for a long time. The kitchen had all kinds of activity, including the bar, dancing, and first samplings of any food making its way to the big table or served by the children.

The downstairs was filled with pool sharks and teenage cousins and friends strategizing about whom they wanted to be near when the new year rang in. The dining room was filled with substantive food and plenty of the best fruits, nuts, desserts, and candies that the good friends would bring.

None of us knew a New Year's outside the home - there was no Times Square, no fancy buffet at a restaurant, no barroom bash. As teenagers, we thought there were better parties outside the home, especially ones that didn't require us to work, but after many years as adults we understood that we were wrong. We had the best New Year's parties, even with all the extra chores.

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