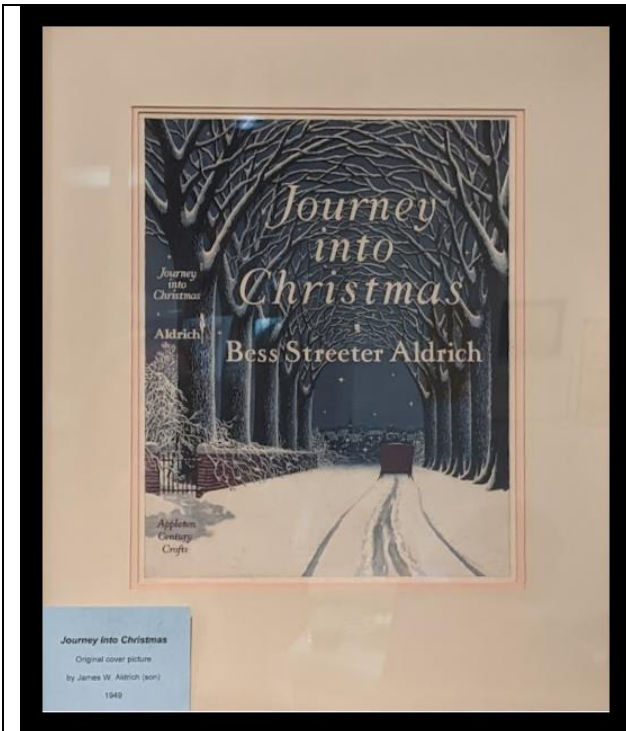


## .Book Discussion Questions for *Journey into Christmas* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"



The original jacket cover was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich. This painting is on display at the Aldrich Museum. For more information on this book, please contact [aldrichfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:aldrichfoundation@gmail.com).

About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her." <sup>1</sup> As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines, and some of her serials became books. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

*Journey into Christmas*, a compilation of twelve Christmas short stories, was published November 11, 1949. "As with all the Aldrich books, it sold well, going into three printings before Christmas."<sup>2</sup>

All of the stories found in *Journey into Christmas* were published in magazines first.

"A Journey into Christmas," story one, was originally published in the *Christian Herald* in December 1947.

"Star Across the Tracks," story two, was published in the December 25, 1948 *Saturday Evening Post* 221.

"The Drum Goes Dead," story three, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1936.

"Youth Is All of an Up-and-Coming," story four, was first published in *Physical Culture Magazine* in May 1931.

"The Man Who Caught the Weather," story five, was originally published in *Century Magazine* in July 1928.

"Bid the Tapers Twinkle," story six was in *The Ladies Home Journal* Issue 52 in January 1935.

"Christmas on the Prairie," story seven, is from *A Lantern in Her Hand*, book first published in 1928.

"Low Lies His Bed," story eight, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1934.

"Another Brought Gifts," story nine, was first published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1936.

"Suzanne's Own Night," story ten, is from *A Song of Years*, which was first a serialized novel and was published weekly in *The Saturday Evening Post* during December 1938 (10,17,24,31) and January 1939 (7, 14, 21).

"The Silent Stars Go By," story eleven, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1933.

"I Remember," story twelve, is almost autobiographical and was first published in *McCall's*, November 1926.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Peterson, c. 1995 University of Nebraska Press (page 198)

## *Journey into Christmas*

Overall questions (Note: #1-3 are opinion questions. Answers will vary.)

- 1) Which story is your favorite from the *Journey into Christmas and Other Stories* Collection?
- 2) Which story could you relate to the most?
- 3) Where there any stories that you did not particularly enjoy? Why?
- 4) The stories were published over a period of twenty-two years. Did Mrs. Aldrich's writing change during that time? How did the world change during that time? *The first part is an opinion. In 1926, the United States was experiencing prosperity. World War 1 had been over for 8 years. In the 1930's, the U.S. experienced the Great Depression. Near the end of that decade, World War 2 had begun. In the 1940's, that was the focus.*
- 5) Eight different magazines published the stories first. Do you think that impacted any of the stories? *Possibly not directly, although being wide published possibly helped with her popularity as a writer.*
- 6) What was the overall tone of the stories as a collection? *Although the stories were realistic, even the sad ones still contain an element of hope.*
- 7) Did Mrs. Aldrich consistently use any themes in these Christmas stories? *Answers could include: faith, family, resourcefulness, community, neighborliness, tradition, nostalgia, love. Characters frequently included those who might be forgotten by general society.*
- 8) Which story do you think relates more closely to Advent? *Opinion, but possibly "Star Across the Tracks"*
- 9) Mrs. Aldrich wrote quite a few stories set at Christmastime. Why did she choose that time of year? *Opinion, but during Christmastime, readers are more likely to be thinking of home and traditions.*
- 10) James Aldrich illustrated these stories for the book. Do you think that added depth to the book or took away from the stories? *Opinion, but due to his connection to his author mother, they probably helped to portray her intent of the stories. (See additional page in this document for more about his illustrations.)*

**Bonus:** The University of Nebraska Press edition cover features the painting, "Falls City Christmas" from the *Saturday Evening Post* December 21, 1946 cover by John Philip Falter. He was also from Nebraska. More information about the painting as well as a closer view of it can be seen at the [John Philip Falter Museum website](#).

Additional thoughts on *Journey into Christmas* directly from Bess Streeter Aldrich.

"Probably the Christmas season meant no more to me as a child than to others, but it did cause a great stirring of the emotions, a pleasant disturbance which has reoccurred again and again over many years. So the result in my writing life has been many Christmas stories. In fact, I almost ready to challenge other writers and claim the heavyweight championship for the number I have done."<sup>3</sup>

"We hope the stories will find old friends and make new ones; that all who read them will sense a renewal of the Christmas spirit, for, as one of the characters thinks, humanity must hang fast to its faith and its hope. It must never let them go as long there remains in the world a child and a song, a gift and a star."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Tribune* "Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales" (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Tribune* "Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales" (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

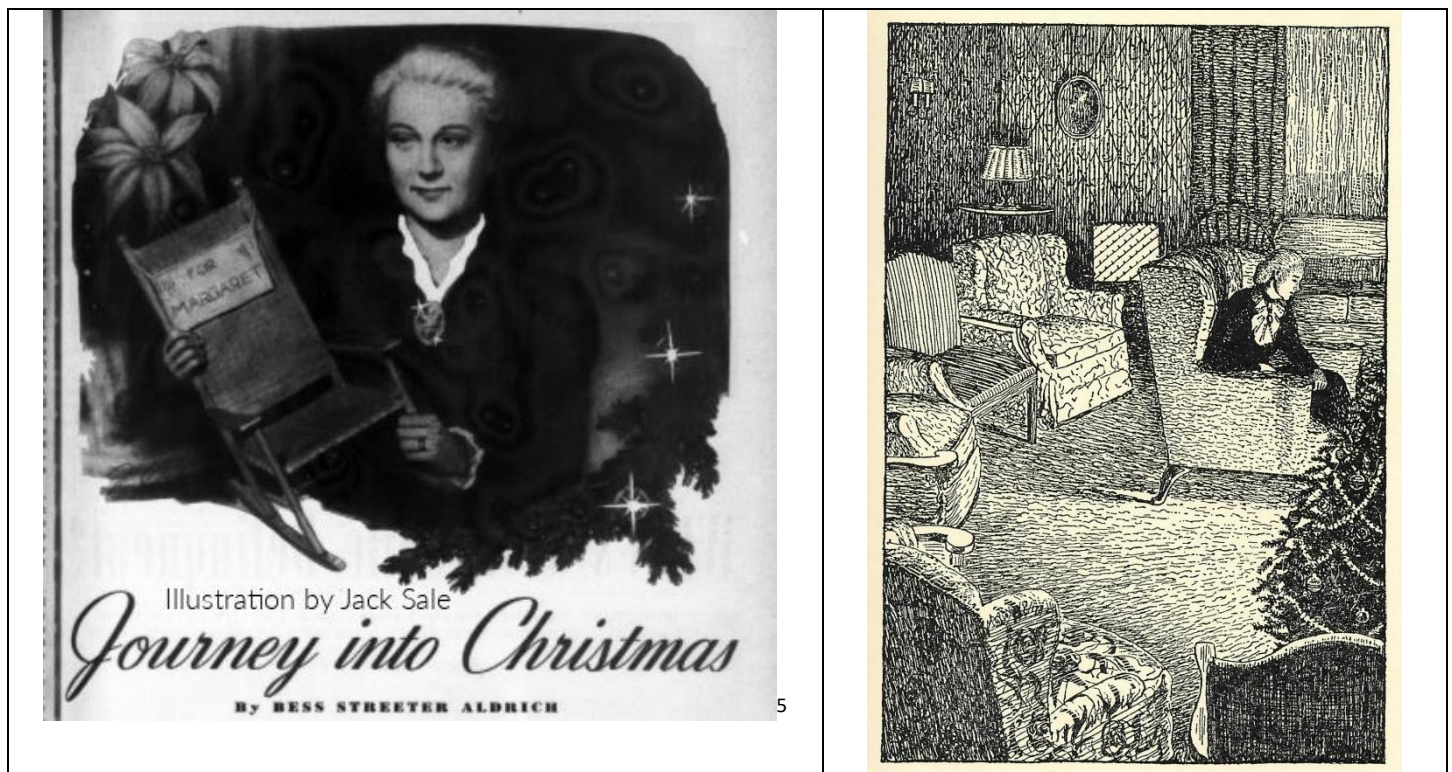
## “A Journey into Christmas”

Plot summary: When her family cannot come home for Christmas, Margaret spends the evening remembering her favorite Christmases from the past.

Margaret Staley	A widow who is about to spend her 60 <sup>th</sup> Christmas along
Don & Janet, young Ralph	Live in California – traveling home for Christmas is too far
Ruth Staley	“career daughter, connected with a children’s hospital” – too hard to get away
Jeanie & Husband, Roy	Two boys (Bud, Larry) were in quarantine
Lee & Ann	Live in Oklahoma – at first, Margaret did not understand why they did not come

- 1) What sort of “self-talk” does Margaret engage in to try to keep her spirits up?  
*She tries to remind herself of all of the past Christmases that her family has been able to attend.*
- 2) What was in the letters from her children?
- 3) Which memory of a Christmas past stands out to you – in the book and in your own life?
- 4) What news takes away the ache of not being with family? Do you think it should have been kept a surprise?
- 5) How did Margaret’s perspective of the empty semicircle of chairs change over the course of the night?

This story originally appeared in the December 1947 issue of *The Christian Herald*. That digitized issue can be seen online. Below is the original illustration along with the book illustration. Which one do you prefer?



Which illustration appeals to you? Which one do you think fits the theme of the story more?

<sup>5</sup> [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_christian-herald\\_1947-12\\_70/page/20/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/sim_christian-herald_1947-12_70/page/20/mode/2up)

## “Star Across the Tracks”

Plot summary: Harm Kurtz is a gardener in charge of three houses in High View. For the upcoming Christmas decoration contest, he helped each owner plan out a theme. Everyone is surprised by who wins the award.

Pa (Harm) Kurtz	“slight and wiry, all muscle and bounce”
Mamma Kurtz	“waddle” “she wore her hair combed high, brushed tightly up at the back and sides where it ended in a hard knot at the top of her head”
Lillie Kurtz	Youngest; worked in the Dillingham Department Store as a seamstress in the remodeling department
Ernie Kurtz	Works for River City Body and Fender Wreck Company; middle child
Carrie (Kurtz)	Oldest daughter; Now married to Bert with two little boys
Scotts	“him I like, her I don’t”; “rambling stone of the ranch type”; Mrs. Scott “knew the least about vegetation of anyone who had ever come under Pa’s scrutiny”; “she had a little cripple son who took most of her time”; “he was a doctor .. who stopped & joked a bit”
Dillinghams	“her I like, him I don’t”; house: “both brick and stone, to say nothing of stained shingles, lumber, tiles, glass bricks and stucco”; favorite yard – “informal and woodsy”; she gave input; “Mr. Dillingham was often loud and obnoxious after working at his store
Porters	“both I don’t like”; “brick colonial”; 4 school age children; he was a Councilman and a lawyer; she was member of Garden Club – she “went in for formal beds”

1) This story was originally titled, “Mr. Kurtz and Christmas.” Which title do you think fits the story better?

*Opinion. “Star Across the Tracks” might draw in more readers since Mr. Kurtz would be an unknown character.*

2) What did Mamma get on Pa about doing before Carrie’s family arrived? What did he do next?

*She wanted him to put up the new lumber on the “rickety old shed.” He did take up many of the old boards, but he did not finish the job and left an open shed.*

3) What was Mamma’s motivation for putting up the display in the shed?

*“I aint doin’ it for show, like them ... “I’m doin’ it for Carrie’s little boys. Something’ they can see for themselves when they drive in. Somethin’ they’ll never forget, like’s not, as long as they live.”*

4) How did the three High View families decorate their houses? What did the Kurtz family think?

The Porters had blue lights on their evergreens which Carrie and Lillie liked. Ma and Ernie’s girl liked that Dillinghams had lighted reindeer. Doctor Scott’s had a singing Santa on the roof. The little boys along with Lillie’s potential beau and Ernie and Bert loved the reindeer and Santa.

5) Which house won the contest? Why did these decorations appealed to the judges? *The Kurtz family won.*

*The display had “simplicity,” used “materials at hand” and also had a “sacred note” of the first Christmas story.*

Additional information on “Star Across the Tracks”: This magazine story was originally illustrated by artist, Glenn Fleischmann. He was born in 1909 and grew up in the town of Manley, Nebraska which is twelve miles away from Elmwood and also in Cass County. Fleischmann eventually moved to New York City to pursue his illustrating career. Since James Aldrich was born down the road in 1912 and also pursued art in New York City, there is a chance the two men knew each other. <sup>6</sup> The illustration is accessible online to all *Saturday Evening Post* subscribers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [Search | History Nebraska: Microsoft Word - 4228am Glen Harvey Fleischmann \(nebraska.gov\)](#) biography

<sup>7</sup> [December 25, 1948 Archives | The Saturday Evening Post](#)

## “The Drum Goes Dead”

Plot summary: Characters: Richard Lanning is the Bellfield bank cashier. During the Depression, everyone in the community was filled with worries and carries. Due to his place in the community, many confide their cares to him; he tries to support everyone. Finding out about others’ favorite Christmases helps him feel better. Ultimately the cure for his unhappiness takes place when he reluctantly plays the role of Santa Claus at the community program again. He comes to realize that “the world was not in chaos to these children.” Hope!

Grace Lanning	“loving the old traditions”; Richard’s wife
Richard Lanning	“How could he be Christmasy this year?” “No one but a cad could destroy the family’s enthusiasm.” Hard worker but discouraged
Alice Lanning	16 years old and wishing Christmas break was longer
Eldon Lanning	12 years old – loud and boisterous
Bank employees	George Adams (President’s “wise-cracking” son); Elise Rouse (“not-so-young” cashier);
Bank customers	Miss Jarman, Marshal Jarman, Hulda Bornheimer, Jake, J.B., Marian, older one, professor
Town program	Mrs. Henry Neiman; Amy Anderson; Joey Meyers and more

1) This story was published in 1936 after the Depression had been going on for several years. Do you think that fact impacted the tone of the story? What was the author’s intent?

The Depression definitely impacted this story, and the author seems to want to pass on hope.

2) Do you agree with the author: “stories are seldom written about the Richard Lannings?” Why or why not?

Opinions may vary, but main characters in stories do tend to be larger than life rather than ordinary.

3) How did listening to the customers recall their favorite Christmases impact Richard’s perspective?

By hearing about the good in the world, Richard was able to recognize that not everything in the world was hopeless.

4) Bank customers are adults. Why do you think the children bestowed such an honor on Richard Lanning?

Although they may not have had as much contact with Richard Lanning, because of his repeated role as Santa, they could tell that he cared about the community.

5) Why did Richard feel “young and hopeful and a bit Christmasy” at the end of the story?

Seeing the children gave him hope as he realized that “the world was not in chaos to these children.”

Additional background on “The Drum Goes Dead”

“One September day I was working on a book manuscript when there came a long-distance call from the fiction editor of *Cosmopolitan*. They were making up the Christmas number and felt that it needed a homey, small town story. Could I get one written right away? An order for a Christmas story, with the hot winds blowing and the midwestern sun drying out the cornfields! It was one of those bad years in the 30s when crops were poor and every one was depressed. Some of that general feeling crept into my story and the result was ‘The Drum Goes Dead.’ “<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Chicago Tribune* “Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales” (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

## “Youth Is All of an Up-and-Coming”

Plot summary: This story is about a loving, farming family. When the kids were grown, the couple moved to a small town. Their neighbors who were quite surprised to discover this couple had a secret.

Characters:

Pa Stoltenberg	Solid, substantial; agile for almost 70 years of age; “long, thin” arms”
Ma	“heavy bulk”; “short fat arms”; she loved to cook for her family
2 daughters	Minnie, Rosa; both are teachers
5 sons	Include 2 farmers, a printer and 2 unknown; possibly all had families
Mother and me	Neighbors; First person narrators telling the story from their perspective

1) Why do you think the Stoltenbergs moved to town?

*Opinion: Perhaps they tired of farming and were ready to be around more people.*

2) What is meant by the quote, “Youth is all of an up-and-coming when the blood is warm?”

*Answers will vary. Perhaps it is referencing the fact that the young think that they are invincible.*

3) Why were the Stoltenbergs avoiding talking about the folks back from Illinois? *Since they were not married when they left town, perhaps they left town in secrecy or in scandal. Either way, they did not want others to mention the fact that they were unmarried.*

4) From the beginning of the story, a Christmas mystery is mentioned. Did you guess the mystery? If not, what did you think was going to be revealed?

5) “Christmas – it is a time of peace.” Do you think Ma is referencing her own state of mind? *Opinion. Because of the fact that they did not marry when they were young, they felt unsettled. During this time period, having children together without being married would have been very rare.*

Additional Background information: This story was one of only two stories published by Mrs. Aldrich in *Physical Culture* magazine. The other one, “Will the Romance Be the Same?” was about old and new love. This story was published in the September 1931 issue. That story can be read in *The Man Who Caught the Weather* collection, *The Bess Streeter Aldrich Reader* and *The Collected Short Works 1920-1954*. Both of these two stories had to do with youth. Read the magazine description below. Why would these stories have been a good fit for the readers of this magazine.

*“Physical Culture was an American magazine on bodybuilding, health, and fitness. It was founded, and for much of its run edited, by Bernarr Macfadden. Physical Culture began in 1899. It was retitled (or subtitled?) “Beauty and Health” in 1941 after Macfadden sold the rights to the magazine, but it appears to have re-adopted the Physical Culture title in 1943 after Macfadden regained control. The magazine may also have been renamed Macfadden's Health Review in 1950. No issue copyright renewals were found for this serial. The first copyright-renewed contribution is from June 1926. The magazine ceased publication after Macfadden's death in 1955.”*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted directly from [Physical Culture archives \(upenn.edu\)](https://www.upenn.edu/physicalculture/)

## “The Man Who Caught the Weather”

Plot summary: Mr. Parline lived his life according to the weather, and it impacted those around him.

Characters:

Parlines	English yet Vermont; “refind, gentle folk, but different and a little queer”
Mr. Parline	Immaculate housewife, shy effacing; rarely leaves their property; quilter
Mrs. Parline	Stocky body, ruddy complexion, fuzzy face; gardener; obsessed with the weather

1) “To old Mr. Parline, the weather was not the background, it was the picture of life itself. If the day was bad, he was half apologetic. If it was pleasant, he glowed with satisfaction.” What does this quote explain about the theme of this story? Why was Mr. Parline obsessed with the weather?

“If the garden was the man’s hobby, the weather was his life.” He liked to be able to chart the patterns. Since his wife was afraid of storms, knowing when one was going to happen was also his way of protecting her.

2) How were the thermometers described? Why were they everywhere?

“Traps everywhere – baited with mercury – little traps to catch the weather.” He didn’t want to miss anything.

3) How did Mr. Parline demonstrate his love for his wife?

He brought his wife “the fruits of his labor.” Anytime there was a storm he rushed to be with her since she was so afraid of storms.

4) How did Mr. Parline care for the neighbors? Did he realize that they appreciated him?

He also brought them produce. Especially at the cemetery, he shared from his garden and information about the cemetery. They did not fully appreciate him until after he was gone.

5) Did he come to a fitting end? Should the story have stopped there or were the final reflections helpful?

He was still trying to protect his wife from the storm. Answers may vary on if the closing pages were helpful.

Additional Background on “The Man Who Caught the Weather”

“ ‘The Man Who Caught the Weather’ went to twenty-nine magazines before it was accepted. The 29<sup>th</sup> was *Century*, at that time, one of the “big four” literary magazines. The story was accepted, later chosen for the O. Henry Award Memorial Volume, has been read on the radio several times recently, and resold in other countries. Let the young writer remember this when his third rejection slip gets him down.”<sup>10</sup>

“This story is unquestionably the best evidence of her persistence. Aldrich, who had childhood memories of a similar man, believed in this story. In Cedar Falls her family had had a neighbor very like Mr. Parline, with his love of gardening and his interest in the weather. Another reason for Aldrich’s desire to find a publisher for ‘The Man’ can no doubt be seen in her own interest in the weather. Her daily journal, which has very short entries, almost without fail records something about the weather conditions, temperatures, or both.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Chicago Tribune* “Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales” (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Peterson, c. 1995 University of Nebraska Press (page 73)

## “Bid the Tapers Twinkle”

Plot summary: Sara Atkin continues with her celebratory preparations even when she finds out her family cannot come back for Christmas.

Characters:

Sara Atkin	One of the town’s early settlers; widow of John; great-grandmother
Jennie Williams	House help who “had grown fat and forty waiting for Mrs. Atkin to find another girl.”
Richard (Dickie)	Lawyer; muddled childhood Christmas program line – now misquoted as a family joke; married to Clarice with son Jimmie
Eva	Concerned about mother’s efforts; married to Professor Fleming; Josephine’s mother
Arnold	Married to Mame with boys and daughter, Marian, who has a 9 month old baby
Helen	Married to farmer, Carl; could not afford to travel (drought) despite having no children



“Bid the Tapers Twinkle”  
Ladies Home Journal January 1935

Illustration by Rico Tomaso archive.org

The Ladies' Home Journal and Practical Housekeeper started in 1883 but soon shortened its name.

**Susan Coolidge is the author of the poem that includes the title line.**

1) “We hang up garlands everywhere and bid the tapers twinkle fair.” Why did Sara keep saying this quote? How does it fit with the theme?

Sara kept saying the quote because it brought back a sweet memory. December was “old Sara Atkin’s own special month – the one for which she lived for – it was the month in which all the children came home.”

2) “To the Atkins family at large, Sara Atkin was Christmas.” How had the Atkins family celebrations changed through the years?

The first Christmas in a sod house, there was a makeshift tree for the baby. During the pioneer days, she had love and energy to make Christmas gifts. Last year, she had 21 present at her table.

3) Why did Sara not tell Jennie her family was no longer coming? Why did she keep preparing?

Her pride stopped her from sharing. Also she didn’t know how to stop preparing – “the food and decorations must not be wasted.” Sharing her extras with other community members made her sad. “She didn’t want lonely people from the highways and hedges. She wanted her own folks. She wanted all the Atkins.”

4) What did the family assume about her excessive celebrations? How does this play into the storyline?

“The way you always slave – it’s just ridiculous. We decided that the only way to keep you from it was just say we weren’t any of us coming, and then walk in the last minute and bring all the things.”

5) Did Sara’s family understand her perspective? Who might have understood her the best in the story?

“Not one had understood how much less painful it is to be tired in your body than to be weary in your mind – how much less distressing it is to have an ache in your bones than to have a hurt in your heart.” Although Jennie tired of hearing the same tapers story and all of the work involved in Christmas, she could see that “old Sara’s sweet white face glowed with an inner light.” “It was that Mary the Mother might have looked that way when she was old.”



## “Christmas on the Prairie”

Plot summary: This chapter is two different excerpts from a book about a Nebraska homesteading family.

Characters: (\* means child is mentioned in first half of the chapter as well)

Abbie Deal	Young homemaker fighting elements; Great-grandmother reminiscing
Will Deal	Trying to provide for his family on the prairie; (has passed away before 2 <sup>nd</sup> part)
Neighbors	Gus and Christine Reinmueller; Sarah Lutz (varying perspectives on Christmas)
*Mack & Emma	Also brought son, Donald (Stanley with his wife’s family)
*Margaret & Dr. Fred	Also brough Dr. Fred Jr., his wife and 2 boys
*John & Eloise	Kids: Wentworth, Laura, Milliard
Grace	A Wesleyan University professor who arrived in her automobile
Kathrine	Daughter of Mack & Emma – also accompanied by Jimmie Buchanan

1) These are excerpts from *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Does that book need to be read to appreciate this chapter?

Answers may vary, but readers may enjoy the story more if already connected to the characters.

2) How did the arrival of the barrel help the family in celebrating Christmas? What other inventive ways did the family make the 1874 Christmas special despite lack of resources?

Without the barrel, Abbie would not have been able to make as many gifts. They decorated the little cedar tree with popcorn balls, shaped tallow candles and dried apple butterflies decorated with feathers. She made molasses candy and baked star and diamond shaped cookies. She painted faces and bonnets on boiled eggs.

3) Do you think this chapter is more or less effective since it covers two different time periods in the book?

Answers may vary. Some might appreciate knowing how the story continues, but others may wish that this chapter only focused on one part. The earlier Christmas might be more appealing with its pioneer themes.

4) Do you agree with Abbie that Christmas gifts are “not so full of the Christmas spirit when you don’t make them yourself?” Why or why not? *Answers may vary.*

5) How did Katherine remember Christmas at Grandma Deal’s? What were some of the grown-up children’s favorite childhood memories? Which ones were mentioned in the first part of the chapter?

“It wouldn’t be Christmas without the wax flowers in the parlor and the patent rocking-chair and the painting of the purple cow and the whutnut.” Beds were placed everywhere. For Abbie’s children, Mack remembered the brass cornet, the big wooden horse made out of logs and the tree. Other memories included extra candy thrown in the grass, the calf tail incident, the jury and the pastor. “Prairie children never forget.”

*A Lantern in Her Hand* is the book that Mrs. Aldrich is most known for writing. In particular, this story excerpt “A Prairie Christmas” resonated with people. This is a clip from the newspaper that explains why.<sup>12</sup>

**“Christmas On The Prairie.” The efforts of the mother to make something out of nothing for the children is so applicable for millions of homes in our present day world.**

<sup>12</sup> “Grit from Sandy Vale” by Ruby Allgood Paris *The Southern Democrat* (Oneonta, Alabama) 29 Dec 1949

## “Low Lies His Bed”

Plot summary: Old Mrs. Parker once lived down the street in a very nice home, but through the years, she has become destitute and now has to rely on the kindness of others. She is struggling with that reality.

Characters:

Mrs. David Daniel Parker	Older woman whose husband & children have died; Once wealthy, now poor
Mr. and Mrs. McIntosh	She is the matron of the Old Ladies Home – he helps her
Anna Kleinschmidt	Washer woman for the Parkers and others; earned her way with a bit of help
Theodore Harms	Paid \$100 for Anna’s stay and all of the money for Mrs. Parker
Others	Old Mrs. Murphy; Old Mrs. Tuttle; Old Mrs. Sargent

1) Rather than starting the story at the Ladies’ Home, the story starts on a train. Why?

By showing Mrs. Parker’s journey back to this town after thirty-five years, the author is able to develop more of an impending sense of doom. If she had been gone for 35 years, she probably never intended to return. This also demonstrates how unsettled and desperate her life was at the moment.

2) What glimpses are given of what happened in between her place of prominence and her place of reliance? Mrs. Parker used to have a fine home, and a prominent place in the community as she started the very social club that furnished her room. At some point, they must have lost their money as her husband died at his own hand. She had become “callous.”

3) How does Anna Kleinschmidt change the tone of the story?

Mrs. Kleinschmidt had worked hard to pay most of her way and was still joyful. She still wanted to make Mrs. Parker feel welcome no matter how she was treated in the past. She is welcoming and will ultimately help provide the connection between Mrs. Parker’s past and present lives.

4) Why did Mrs. Parker venture out to her old house? How did the experience change her perspective? She was trying to reach her old house “as though she were missing a definite engagement there, as though in reality the family expected her.” Anna helped her make it the rest of the way after she stumbled and hurt her knee. Seeing the house lit up with Anna by her side allowed her to move on. “Instead of a bitterness, she felt only tenderness at the familiar sight. In place of coldness, warmth.”

5) “Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining, Low lies his bed with the beasts of the stall. Angels adore Him in slumber reclining, Maker and Monarch who cares for us all.” How does this quote sum up the story?

She seemed to finally recognize that even though her route to arrive at this home was different than some of the ladies, they all “had kindled Christmas fires on the hearthstone of a home.” She then was able to recall that another “had known anguish and sorrow and a lowly bed” and that fact fully changed her perspective.

**A newspaper note on this story from Mrs. Aldrich:** “ ‘Low Lies His Bed’ was written after a visit to an old ladies’ home. I recall the magazine wiring: ‘Some staff members think low lies his bed should read low lies his head please wire.’ My wire went back, ‘Low lies his bed, old version, low lies his head, new version.’ Of such small distractions is a writer’s life composed.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Chicago Tribune* “Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales” (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

## “Another Brought Gifts”

Plot summary: Through the years, Jed Miller helped the town, especially by playing Santa Claus.

### Characters:

“Old Jed Miller”	Humble, early settler; lived alone; played town Santa Claus
Town children	Tommie Graham, Johnnie Quinn
Mrs. Tobbin	“both a pillar and a power” – claims Jed is a nuisance; took over the pageant
Community	Doctor Waters; Reverend Julius Parkinson

#### 1) How is Jed involved in the town? In the church?

He did odd jobs as they had him: “spade the lettuce beds,” “beat the carpets,” scythe and mow as well as install storm windows. “Jed’s part in the Sunday services consisted in sitting behind the organ and pumping wind into the lungs of its cloth anatomy.”

#### 2) How is Santa Claus portrayed in the 1880s and 1890s? How has that changed today?

“In those years ..., Santa Claus was a single entity- an individual upon whom one could count specifically in regard to time and place. You heard his bells and he arrived through the side door of the church onto the pulpit, frostladen and breathless. He bade you farewell and disappeared through the same door. You heard his bells die away in the distance and knew he was gone for an interminable year. He did not walk the streets advertising toothpaste or barbecued sandwiches or basket-ball-games-in-the-coliseum-several-good-seats-left-at-thirty-five-cents.” In modern times, Santa seems to be on every street corner and in commercials.

#### 3) How does the “Santa Claus quarter” play into the story?

All children under the age of ten who could walk to the stage themselves were given a shining quarter.

#### 4) How did the perspective of Jed change for the children as they got older?

“When you were much older, you saw something else: the drama and the pathos that were old man Miller. You saw how all year old Jed Miller lived for this one hour of giving. It seemed foolish, saving from his small wages to give it away in one reckless hour of abandon. Don Quixote mowing lawns! Pikeville called it plain dumb.”

#### 5) What were Jed’s last words of advice? How did he impact his community for the better?

“Live upright lives. Do good with this here money. Always keep the Christmas spirit ... ‘n’ make ... other children happy.” The community “recalling how little work he had been able to do that year, every one realized he must have skimmed himself to save for that last Christmas.” They recognized the story was “as old-fashioned as that one about the men who long ago brought Another Child gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.”

**Did you know?** This book was included in the collection of Mrs. Aldrich’s short stories published in November 1936 entitled, *The Man Who Caught the Weather*. Although this story technically was available earlier in the year in the magazine, Mrs. Aldrich had already selected it to be a part of the collection the year before. Several other stories that are a part of *Journey into Christmas* are that collection including “Silent Stars Go By,” “Another Brought Gifts,” “Bid the Tapers Twinkle,” and “Low Lies His Bed.”

“Suzanne’s Own Night”

Plot: On cold Christmas Eve 1855, a family gathers together in a log house near Iowa’s Red Cedar River.

Characters:

Henry & Lucy	Came over from other house; she is “Madonna like”
Suzanne	Daughter who took the time to make or gather presents for everyone
Pa	Reminisces about Christmas in England
Ma	Reminisces about her ancestor (one if by land, two if by sea)
Others	Sarah, Sabina, Phineas, Emily, Jeanie, Phoebe Lou, Melinda, Celia

1) This is an excerpt from *Song of Years*. Does that book need to be read to appreciate this chapter?

Answers may vary, but readers do enjoy connecting with characters which is hard to do in book excerpts.

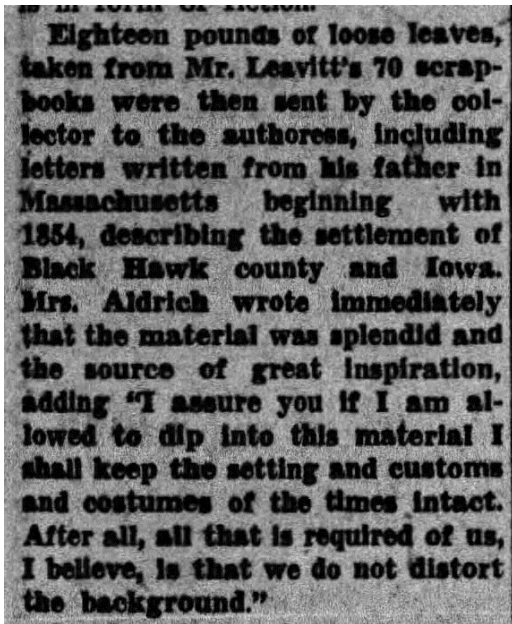
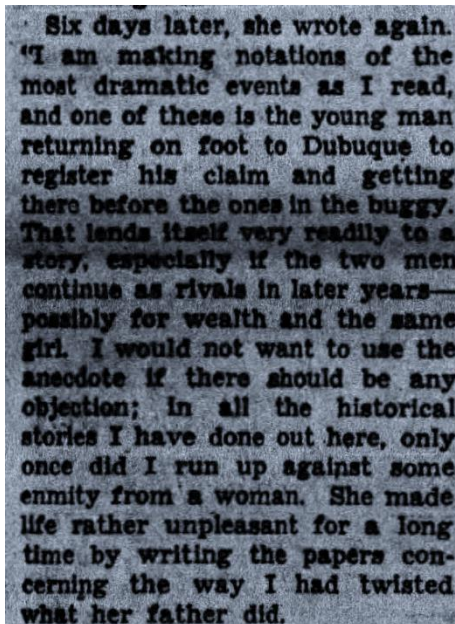
2) At first, we only find out about the weather conditions. Why might the story have started that way?

This shows the hardiness of pioneers to survive blizzards and also why they gathered around the fire.

3) Why did Suzanne feel that Christmas Eve was her own night? A feeling. “*Christmas Eve was a white light that drew a magic circle around the members of your family to hem them all in and fasten them together.*”

4) “Every poor quality about them fell away and only the good ones remained.” Suzanne is stating that she can only see the good in her people at Christmas. Do you think this is always the case for people?

For some people, Christmas is a time of sentimental allowance. For others, Christmas magnifies past hurts and can reopen festering wounds.

<p>5) “Christmas Eve was a night of song that wrapped itself about you like a shawl. But it warmed more than your body. It warmed your heart ... filled it, too, with melody that would last forever. Even though you grew up and found you could never quite bring back the magic feeling of this night, the melody would stay in your heart always -a song for all the years.” This quote ends the chapter and sums up how many people feel about Christmas. What resonates with you? <i>Answers may vary.</i></p>	<p>Mrs. Aldrich was provided with a wealth of stories for <i>A Song of Years</i>.</p> 	<p>But she was concerned about mixing up facts with fiction</p> 
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<sup>14</sup> “Scrapbook Provides Inspiration for *Song of Years*” 03 May 1939 *Iowa City Press-Citizen* (Iowa City, Iowa)

“The Silent Stars Go By”

Plot summary: After losing what she was thought was everything during the Depression, through sickness a woman comes to realize what matters most.

Characters:

Janet	Wife to Neal, mother to Michael and Dorothy
Neal	Husband to Janet; former 3 <sup>rd</sup> generation owner of Broderick’s
Michael	Son; in her dream, “what a comrade her father was making of Michael”
Dorothy	Daughter; in her dream, “what devotion existed between Dorothy and her mother.”
Mother	Departed; comes to Janet in a dream to help her gain perspective

1) Why did Janet feel like her life was over?

“Life had betrayed her.” They lost their business and house. She was ill and did not care about her health now.

2) “Failure was not something she could tolerate as a human.” How did Janet’s need for perfection impact her life? Were her high expectations only for herself or for others also?

Normally she could take steps to solve problems. But all of the steps they had taken to save the business were not effective. “She knows she ought not to blame Neal,” but evidently, she did.

3) How do the carol lines, “above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by” play into the story?


This may symbolize the passing of time that is continuing as she is dreaming while she is unconscious.

4) “It was the spirit of our old home – more than things in it.” How did this statement by Janet’s mother impact her? How could it impact the generations today?

She finally realized that she was holding onto stuff over people. Answers may vary on the statement impact.

5) What was Janet’s deep desire? How might her life change after this illness and her dream?

She wanted her family to understand her dream. She also felt a “deep desire to care for them, to give them ore of herself, to carry on the comradeship they had but recently known.” As a result of her illness and dream, Janet will probably care more about the people than the property.

 <p>15</p>	<p>“Silent Stars Go By” became a two-hour holiday movie in December 1983. Director Earl Hammer had also produced “The Homecoming” about the Waltons.</p>	<p>Most of “The Gift of Love” is told in a flashback as Lee Remick is dreaming. She stars as a woman who loses both the family department store and her mother (Angela Lansbury) shortly before Christmas. After her mother’s funeral, she falls asleep and dreams of happier Christmas times. The memories bring her peace and the strength to deal with the future.</p> <p>16</p>
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<sup>15</sup> *South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, IN) advertisement 20 December 1983 (Note: the movie premiered 12/20/83 at 8 CST)

<sup>16</sup> “CBS Special Based on Bess Streefer Aldrich Story” by Katie Riley *Lincoln Star*. (Lincoln, NE) 18 Dec 1983

## “I Remember”

Plot summary: Bess Streeter Aldrich recalls certain scenes from her childhood memories. She also talks about her family, including her Streeter and Anderson relatives, along with the town where she lived and school.

Characters:

Her Family	Father & Mother, brothers & wives; sisters & wives;
Streeters	Grandfather (deceased); 7 Aunts (lively) & their families;
Andersons	Uncle Jim, Aunt Sarah, Grandmother Anderson, Aunts Jane, Margaret (Isabelle)

1) At the beginning of the story, she tells about an experience that seems disconnected. How does she draw this and other experiences together at the end? Why do you think that understanding Mrs. Aldrich’s background might be important to the reader?

She talks about being lost along a straight path and how when she finds her mother, she feels safe. At the end of this story, she talks about how even though some memories may be disconnected, in the end, they will all make sense, she may see her mother and feel safe again because this life will be over.

By knowing more about Mrs. Aldrich, readers will appreciate how her background influences her stories such as themes of independence and determination as well as stories about time passing.

2) Why do you think that she includes so many stories about her family’s arrival to Iowa from other locations?

Many of her characters are hard-working, salt-of-the-earth folks who were willing to bravely leave their homes for the new land. One could assume that Mrs. Aldrich admires her pioneering family.

3) Do you recognize any of the stories that she tells from her books or her own written short stories?

Answers will vary. A few possibilities Basil and Margaret’s story is fictionalized in *A Lantern in Her Hand*. The wedding scene in that book reflect her parents own wedding. Her Great-Grandpa Zimri’s story is retold in parts of *A Song of Years*. Longtime small-town families often appear. “There is something eminently satisfying and stabilizing in childhood to be surrounded by many relatives whose roots lie deep in a single community.”

4) What memory could you relate to the most? Where there any memories that you wish would have been expanded on in this story or in a fictional setting? Answers will vary

5) How are her memories different or similar to your own? Are the differences generational, regional/geographical or socio-economical? Answers will vary.

**Behind the Scenes note about “I Remember.”** This story was included in the November 1926 issue of McCall’s. *The Cutters*, which was originally a serialized novel, was just published in August 1926. *Mother Mason*, another serialized novel, was released first, followed by *Rim of the Prairie*. Perhaps recalling her childhood memories reminded Mrs. Aldrich that she still had many stories to write.

“James Aldrich is a commercial artist, and has had noted success as an illustrator and jacket designer for publishing houses – We think he did himself proud on the jacket for his mother’s most recent book, “Journey into Christmas” which he was asked by the publisher to do.”<sup>17</sup>

Not only did James Aldrich design the dust jacket, but he also did original illustrations inside the book.

			
“Journey into Christmas”	“Star Across the Tracks”	“The Drum Goes Dead”	“The Man who Caught the Weather”
			
“Bid the Tapers Twinkle”	“Low Lies His Bed”	“Another Brought Gifts”	“The Silent Stars Go By”

- 1) Which illustration is your favorite?
- 2) Do you think one of the illustrations matches the stories better than the others?
- 3) How do the pictures bring these Christmas stories to life?
- 4) Neither of the book excerpts are illustrated. Why do you think that is?
- 5) What feelings are portrayed in these illustrations?

<sup>17</sup> *Lincoln Star* “Up and Down Holiday Lane.” 27 Dec 1949 Page 7

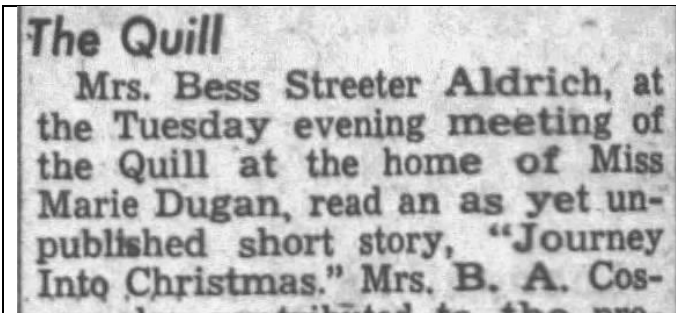
Mrs. Aldrich definitely considered James' illustrations to add to her story. Even from this simple statement, one can tell that she was proud of his contribution to the project. "The book is rather a family affair for the jacket and illustrations are done by my son, James Aldrich, a commercial artist in New York."<sup>18</sup>

## The Quill



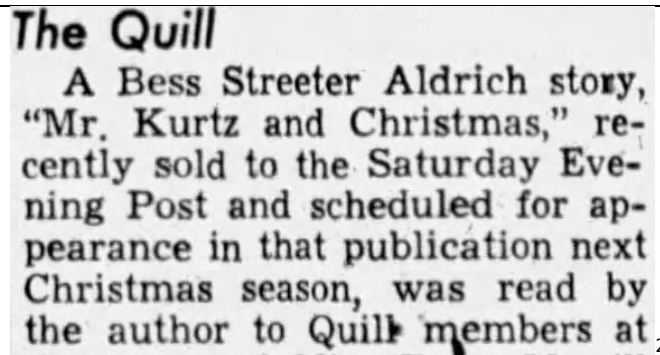
In 1921 a group of women writers began meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska. They formally organized as the "Happy Venture Club" on January 25, 1922. At the monthly meetings members read short stories, poems or chapters of their longer works; participated in dramatic sketches; and reported on their work in progress, publications, and honors. Applications for membership were required to submit samples of their work to be evaluated by a committee. The group changed its name to "The Quill" on September 12, 1923. The organization included such members as Bess Streeter Aldrich, Mari Sandoz, Eleanor Hinman, and Mignon Eberhart.<sup>19</sup>

Writers who were involved in The Quill monthly club share works in progress. Bess Streeter Aldrich shared at least two of the stories found in the book, *A Journey to Christmas*, to the club members in advance of publication.



**The Quill**  
Mrs. Bess Streeter Aldrich, at the Tuesday evening meeting of the Quill at the home of Miss Marie Dugan, read an as yet unpublished short story, "Journey Into Christmas." Mrs. B. A. Cos-

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**The Quill**  
A Bess Streeter Aldrich story, "Mr. Kurtz and Christmas," recently sold to the Saturday Evening Post and scheduled for appearance in that publication next Christmas season, was read by the author to Quill members at

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- 1) Did the notable names encourage membership or do you think the community was aware of the group?
- 2) Do you think Mrs. Aldrich asked for any feedback on the stories?
- 3) How do you think being in a writing group might have been beneficial for Mrs. Aldrich?

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Tribune* "Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales" (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

<sup>19</sup> [The Quill \(Lincoln, Neb.\) \[RG3737.AM\] | History Nebraska](#) The Nebraska Historical Society has a Quill collection of meeting notes and even correspondence from Bess Streeter Aldrich. Items can be seen at their 15<sup>th</sup> & R location. See website on how to do that.

<sup>20</sup> *Lincoln Journal Star* 14 July 1947

<sup>21</sup> *Nebraska State Journal* 12 Feb 1948