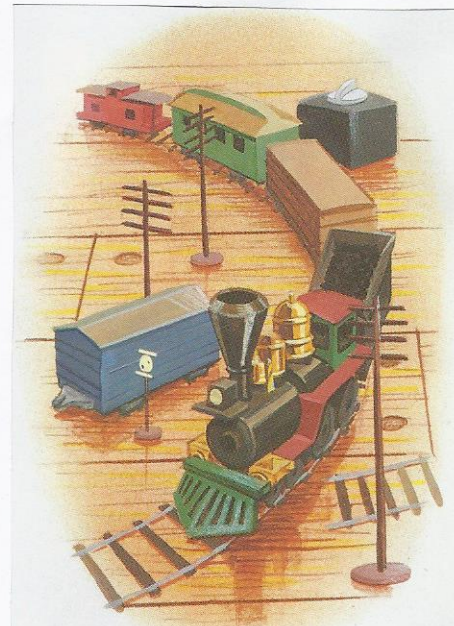


Several Focus on the Family authors and a past contributor describe . . .



# The Christmas I Remember Most



by Dean Merrill, co-author of *Together at Home*

**W**hat do you do with a kid whose Christmas expectations have soared totally out of sight?

My parents decided to burst my bubble early that year, not long after Thanksgiving. They had listened to two months of gabbling about an electric train. Not just any electric train—a Lionel. They had watched me gaze for hours at the colorful catalog, mesmerized by the Golden

West Special "O" Gauge 5-Car Freight Set with MagneTraction—only \$69.50.

That was close to a week's salary for my father, a small-town pastor in Illinois. But his 10-year-old son was adamant. This wasn't just a fantasy, this was a firm requisition. A Lionel train for Christmas—everybody understand?

"Son, I need to tell you something," my mother said one snowy evening after supper. "Dad and I have talked, and we think it's best that you know now"—her eyes met mine directly—"that you won't be getting that train for Christmas. It's just too much."

So my bluff hadn't worked. I stared at the linoleum. I wasn't angry, just disappointed. I had dared to hope that maybe . . . now reality had arrived.

"But I have a suggestion," she went on, pulling my attention back. "You know, a lot of your paper route customers give you something extra at Christmas time. If you save *all* your tips . . . don't spend a cent . . . you might wind up with as much as \$20. That would be enough to buy a cheaper train, wouldn't it?"

Not a Lionel, that's for sure. One of those Brand X kinds, made out of tin or something instead of the finely detailed heavy plastic shown in the catalog.

In the days that followed, I realized Mom's plan—weak as it was—was better than nothing. The tips began going into a separate envelope on my dresser. By the time we left on December 26 for a short trip to see relatives, I'd accumulated \$21.75.

In a downtown department store, I even smiled once or twice to see some after-Christmas sale prices. I managed to walk out with a two-part engine with Santa Fe markings, a boxcar, a gondola, a Shell Oil tanker car, and a caboose, plus one oval of track and a transformer. It ran well enough, and I was pleased to set it up on my aunt's living room floor.

Her son Jack, home from the Navy, watched me run my train around and around, then change the order of the cars for a little variety. "Nice rig," he said gazing down. "But I have an idea. Why don't we see if we can find some more stuff to go with it?"

What did he mean?

Soon we had driven through the wintry streets to another store, where Jack began picking out accessories— a deluxe pair of remote-control switches, two uncouplers, extra track, a crossing piece, miniature telephone poles, bill-

boards with changeable signs—the works. I could hardly contain myself. In one hour my train became the most amazing setup I'd ever seen.

That Christmas I learned that God has a way of taking care of those who live within their means. I found out that less sometimes turns into more. The Giver has more than one way to give his children delight.

And today, more than 30 years later—the Santa Fe still runs. 🐾