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"My Uncle Al Capone played Santa Claus. A True Story."



1930. It was a terrible year for most of us. The Depression had set in deep. My old man, along with a lot of other heads of families, was laid off without an hour's notice. Small businesses closed down, hundreds of them. Families doubled up to save rent. In Burnham there were exactly three people outside of city hall with steady jobs - the mailman, the milkman and a schoolteacher, and the schoolteacher only got paid every three or four, months. Mom got work as a scrub-woman at the school. And now when Al and the boys came around for volleyball he'd slip her \$10 and apologize for dirtying up the floor she'd just been washing. I hung on to my shoeshine stand for dear life.

The breadlines. The soup kitchens - Al ran his own in Chicago. Beggars coming around to your back door for a crust of bread. Food was cheap enough, but nobody had money to buy it. The corner

drugstores sold cigarettes two for a penny. Who could afford a full pack? There was always a long line in front of the roll-your-own cigarette machine. If you rolled them thin enough, you could get 50 cigarettes out of a 10-cent package. We practically lived on the three-day-old bread Dad brought home from a bakery. A gunnysack full cost 25-cents and we kids would rummage through it, hoping to find a sweet roll or two.

Christmas 1930. I'll remember it as long as I live. None of the kids expected any presents. But maybe a chicken dinner. We still had a few hens scratching around the backyard. Then the miracle happened. We were gathered around the Christmas tree - such as it was, just bare branches - when there comes a loud knocking on the front door. Dad opens up and it's Santa Claus, whiskers, red suit and a big bag on his back. I yelled "Al!" and threw myself at him. He clapped his hands and six of his boys came in, each lugging a box of groceries that could have fed the whole neighborhood. They helped Mom stack them neatly on the pantry shelves. There were expensive gifts for everybody - a watch set in diamonds for Babe, slip-over sweaters for my brothers Edward, Sam, Don, and me. Don got a wind-up train and a whole set of tracks. My sister Kathy got the most beautiful doll I ever saw, with a whole wardrobe. And the turkey with all the fixings. I never tasted anything so good in my life.