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Holiday Traditions, from Then Till Now

By Chris Lavin



Deb Potter of Moraga grew up on the East Coast with single candles in the windows during the holidays, so she continues the tradition at her home in Moraga each year. The neighbors now expect to see them.
Photo Chris Lavin

Deb Potter of Moraga remembers the event distinctly. It was after Thanksgiving, she was a little girl, and she'd been counting the days to Christmas. Finally it was Christmas Eve night, and her father urgently called her outside to see something special.

"He said, 'Debbie, come here!' and it was a red blinking light slowly moving across the sky," said Potter, who was growing up in Philadelphia and now lives on a cozy cul-de-sac at the edge of Moraga. "I climbed into his lap, leaned back and looked up, and there it was." Her father could sense her wonder, and he wrapped his arms around her. "That," he said, "is Santa's sleigh, and he's coming tonight!" Potter was thrilled.

Fast forward to 2014, when Potter is, ironically, a flight attendant (she suspects now that what her father pointed out was a plane, but she will not testify to that in court), and the traditions continue. She keeps an eye on the sky for her relatives and neighbors. Her neighborhood has come to expect the single candles in the windows of her home, electric candles she has carefully

arranged and put there for 19 years during the holiday season.

Growing up in Philadelphia, Potter loved the simple tradition on the East Coast of putting single candles in windows to signify the holidays, and she has continued it ever since. She is about 19 years before her time, according to holiday decorating aficionados - because throughout Lamorinda the holidays have taken on a more secular, simple feel. Fewer lights, less ... hoopla.

"I would say that it's more rustic, it's more natural," said Susan Marconi, a home goods buyer at Across the Way in Moraga. "There are lots of boughs, deer antlers - it's natural. It's foraging from the earth, and simple is better. Burlap is big, for instance. Burlap is everywhere this holiday season."

In other words, gone are the days when neighbors competed with neighbors for the most spectacular display, ala how Chevy Chase blew out the electricity in his neighborhood when he plugged in his lights in the movie "Christmas Vacation." That would never happen here, Marconi says.

The trend Marconi has seen coming is now in full force. "It's not so over the top anymore," she said. "People don't have lights all over the place. They are keeping it simple." She sees the trend this year as downsizing. "People are more frugal," she said. She believes the farm-to-table movement has influenced the holidays enormously, making people think of sustainable approaches to the holidays, from the food on their tables to the natural decorations in their homes.

"It should be about spending time with people you want to spend time with," Marconi said. Some items she has seen selling a lot fits that theme, including recyclable table runners made of printed butcher paper that you can rip off, lay down on the middle of the table, get it all messed up during a fun dinner, then stick it in the recycle bin. Or she also likes placemats that you can write on and recycle, or write in chalk and wipe it off. "You can write guests' names on the mats, or put a message to your children. I like the idea of making a theme over dinner, like 'Write down what you're thankful for, and we'll talk about it,'" she said. "People can get really creative."

"It's really all about the holiday spirit, no matter what you celebrate," she said. And that includes magic. Sometimes the best parts of the holidays have nothing at all do to with trees or lights or decorations or food.

So if you are 9 or 10 years old or younger, living in certain parts of Lamorinda, and you are still reading this article, stop now. Because we all know that you have heard rumors that certain members of your neighborhood might go out on a Christmas Eve night, say around bed-time, and point out a red blinking light traveling across the sky, or secretly jangle certain bells that could sound as if they might hang around a reindeer's neck. There might even be a sound of clatter on the roof, caused by a tossed rock.

But don't believe those rumors about the neighbors doing it. It's really the result of the red light blinking across the sky, reindeer harnesses decorated with bells, and the sound of hooves clattering to a stop on the roof. Honest.



Even a drive-by of the Potter home in Moraga lends itself to a secular, simple, holiday feel. Photos Chris Lavin



Besides the relatives even the neighbors get in on the action in a cul-de-sac in Moraga to put in the Potters' single candles in the upper story windows for the holidays, including, from left, Bridget Kelly, Sydney Reed, twins Brody and Maya Reed, Crosby Kelly, Colin Kelly, and Skyler Reed. They remember seeing the candles appear magically in the Potters' windows their whole lives.

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