

12 Years of Christmas

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season into something fit to fill the pages of an afternoon tabloid? The ones to come would, hopefully, be glitzy, glam affairs straight out of the legendary Neiman-Marcus Christmas Book.

Come the 25th, our family celebrated the Lord's birthday in genteelly Filipino fashion, with the entire clan gathering for the usual rollicking riot of opening gifts, over-eating, and obligatory gossip. The merry melee was broken only by our suddenly teary-eyed *mayordoma* Paula, a former *yaya* (nursemaid) of mine, who in between quiet sobs said she wished that I would be happy celebrating future holidays "with the white Christmas in the US." I didn't have the heart to tell her it didn't snow in San Francisco.

Fast forward a year, and again December was here. But this time, "here" was sybaritic San Francisco, thank God. The weekend before Dec. 25, I let the season really soak in, strolling with my Significant Other amongst the chic set circulating through the elegant emporia situated 'round San Fran's Union Square. In the center of it all was an extravagantly-decorated Christmas tree, high as an eight-storey building, surrounded by an ice-skating rink where brightly-dressed revelers were gliding gracefully to the sound of Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*. I was having the time of my life, exclaiming at one point, "Now this is one helluva happy holiday!" I was so enthralled that even an abjectly humiliating experience—such as paying more attention to the Yuletide spectacle around me than where I was going and running headlong into a Salvation Army Santa, toppling both him and his pot of change to the ground—couldn't unsettle me.

What did, though, was waking up Christmas morn with only my main squeeze to keep me company. After a lifetime's worth of Christmas days spent at my grandparents' compound, where our ritual of opening presents in chronological order meant it took over two hours just to get through everyone's gifts, the fact that it now took just two minutes to do the same thing brought into stark relief how far away from everyone I now was. My grandmother's *paella*, morcon and embotido, my grandfather's jokes, the dishes and other diversions shared with siblings and cousins, all now 8,000 miles away instead of in the next room. I became nearly as teary-eyed as *yaya* Paula, and the only way to soften the sorrow was to make multiple, lengthy long-distance phone calls throughout the day to everyone in Manila whose number I could remember.

And it only got worse the next Christmas. I had met and become smitten with someone new a few months before, and in the span

of nine days we went from being total strangers to falling madly in love, to the point where we ended up signing a year-long lease on an apartment and moving in together, surely destined to live happily ever after. Well, the "Nine Days to Connubial Bliss" technique may have worked for Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, but it sure as heck didn't for us. Within three months, incompatibility, immaturity, and various idiosyncrasies had driven us WAY apart.

Luckily, after a few years, my Christmases were far more merry than melancholy. By that time I'd become blessed with a large enough circle of friends that Yuletide celebrations were marked not by loneliness but by a happy lunacy instead. Like that one year when I hosted a holiday party and invited 50 of my nearest and dearest pals, most of whom showed up with multiple friends of their own and copious amounts of alcohol. My apartment was so crowded that at one point it took me five minutes to travel the 10 feet from the kitchen to the living room. And the crowd was so animated that spontaneous shows kept starting up out of the blue.

In the last 12 years, I've been privileged enough to celebrate Christmas in a myriad ways. Snowed in with some friends in a cabin up near Yosemite, and learning to chop firewood to keep warm (and toast marshmallows with). Strolling down the busy sidewalks of New York with my family, enjoying the clear, crisp winter's day and the convivial company, along with the liberal usage of the gift cards that our dear mother had slipped into our pockets Christmas morning. Swinging a golf club at the 9-hole course at SF's Golden Gate Park with a good friend who, just as we were about to tee off, saw a bird land on the green and made the memorable quip, "This could only happen on Christmas—look, it's a partridge on a Par Three!"

I've spent the day with family, with friends, with a special someone, and completely alone. And have gradually, gladly come to understand that it's not who you're with, or where you are, or what you're doing that makes for a merry Christmas. It's realizing that the day is about Love, the kind that leads to a baby being born in a manger, destined from birth to make the ultimate sacrifice; the love that makes mothers cry copiously for their children at the slightest hint of their offspring's turmoil; the love that makes friends fly to your side to nurse you through hard times and heartbreak. It is knowing you are loved, and appreciating the value of such a gift, *yaya* Paula, that helps ensure no matter what the circumstances, white Christmas or not, this season will always be a happy one. ■

Obama's election voted top news story of 2008

by DAVID CRARY
AP National Writer

NEW YORK—The epic election that made Barack Obama the first African-American president was the top news story of 2008—followed closely by the economic meltdown that will test his leadership, according to US editors and news directors voting in *The Associated Press* annual poll.

The campaign, with subplots emerging throughout the year, received 100 first-place votes out of 155 ballots cast for the top 10 stories. Two other political sagas—the history-making candidacies of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin—also made the list.

The vast economic crisis, plunging the US into recession and ravaging many business sectors worldwide, was the No. 2 story, receiving 49 first-place votes. The precipitous rise and fall of oil prices was No. 3.

The top story of 2007 was the massacre of 32 people at Virginia Tech University by a mentally disturbed student gunman.

Here are 2008's top 10 stories, as voted by AP members:

1. US Election: Obama emerged from Election Night as a decisive victor and a symbol for the world of America's democratic promise. But he reached that point only after a grueling battle with Clinton for the Democratic nomination and then an often-nasty showdown with the McCain/Palin ticket in the run-up to the election.

2. Economic meltdown: The bad news kept coming—collapses of Wall Street giants; huge stock market losses; plummeting home prices and a surge of foreclosures; desperate times for US automakers. It added up to the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and will cost the federal government well over \$1 trillion in various rescue and stimulus packages.

3. Oil prices: The global economic angst produced hyper-volatile energy markets. The price of crude soared as high as \$150 a barrel in July before crashing to \$33 this month. In the US, the average price for a gallon of regular gas peaked at \$4.11, then plunged below \$1.70.

4. Iraq: The much-debated "surge" of US troops helped reduce violence after more than five years of war, but Iraq is still buffeted daily by bombings, ambushes, kidnappings and political uncertainty. A newly ratified US-Iraqi security agreement sets a timetable for U.S. troop withdrawal by 2012.

5. Beijing Olympics: China hosted the Olympics for first time, drawing praise for logistical mastery and condemnation for heavy-handed security measures. The games themselves were rated a suc-



In this Nov. 4, 2008 file photo, President-elect Barack Obama, left, his wife Michelle Obama, right, and two daughters, Malia, 7, and Sasha, 10, wave at the election night rally in Chicago. AP File photo by Jae C. Hong

cess, highlighted by the record-shattering performances of swimmer Michael Phelps and sprinter Usain Bolt.

6. Chinese earthquake: A huge quake in May killed 70,000 people in Sichuan province and left 5 million homeless. Many thousands of children were among the victims—authorities said about 7,000 classrooms were destroyed in shoddily built schools.

7. Sarah Palin: Few Americans outside Alaska knew much about its governor when Republican John McCain picked her as his running mate. That changed rapidly. To her conservative admirers, she was a feisty, refreshing change from most politicians; to her critics, she was in over her head, and worthy of all the lampooning she endured.

8. Mumbai terrorism: Ten attackers allegedly sponsored by a Pakistan-based Islamic group terrorized India's financial capital in November, killing 164 people in coordinated attacks on hotels, markets and a train station. India's perennially uneasy relations with Pakistan were badly strained.

9. Hillary Clinton: She didn't win, but Clinton came closer than any other woman in US history to becoming a major party's presidential nominee. Her determined primary campaign, waged vigorously even when it seemed a lost cause, inspired millions of women across the country—and helped persuade Obama to choose her as secretary of state.

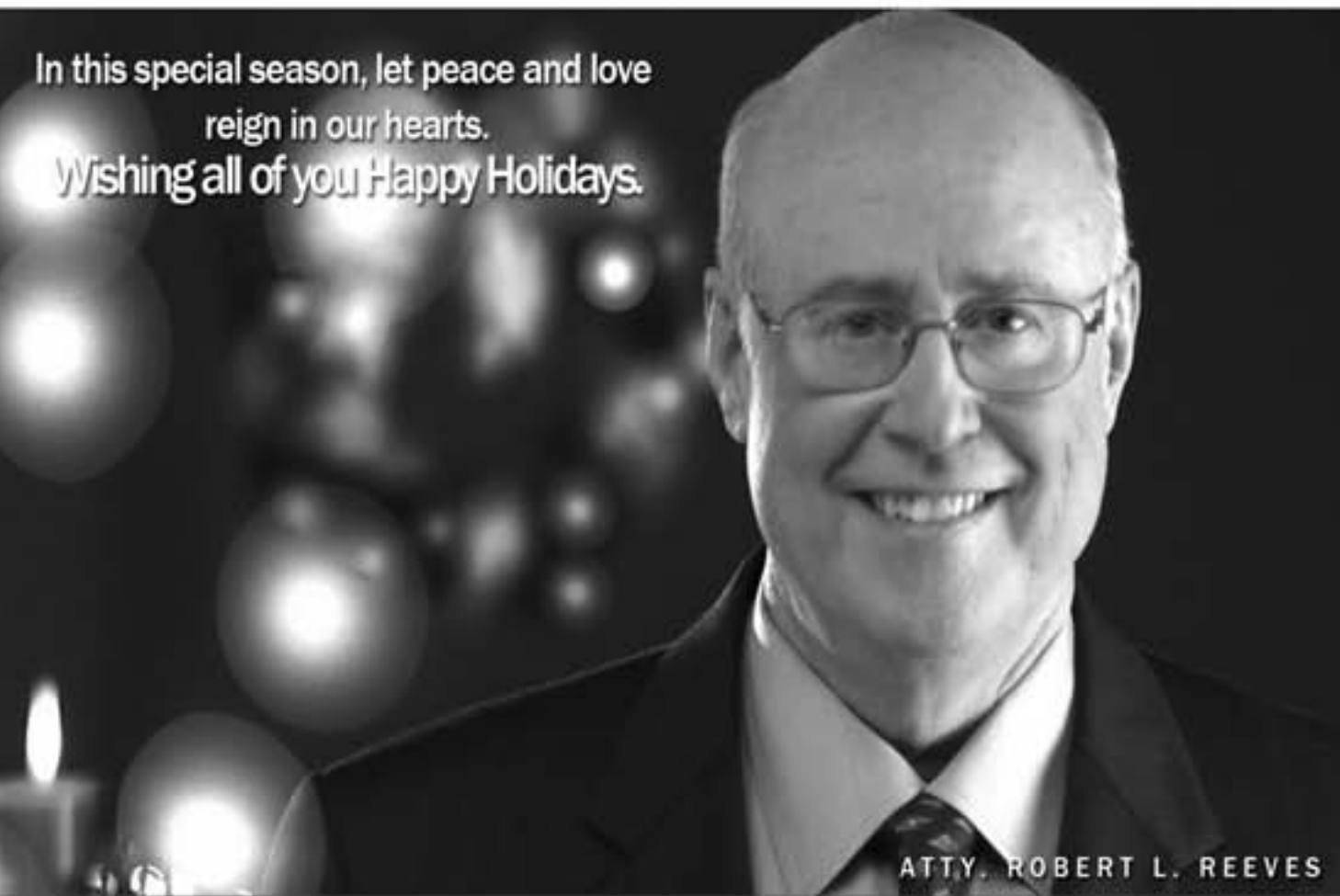
10. Russia-Georgia war: The two nations waged a five-day war in August ignited by a Georgian artillery barrage on the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Russia responded with a drive deep into Georgia.

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