

Christmas Group Photos

A family Christmas Eve tradition

The Olson Family

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Preface: Christmas and Cameras

Photography has long been a hobby in the Olson family. It was passed down from Tod's father to him, from Jackie's father to her, and from them to their children. Christmas events and family gatherings provided popular photographic subjects.

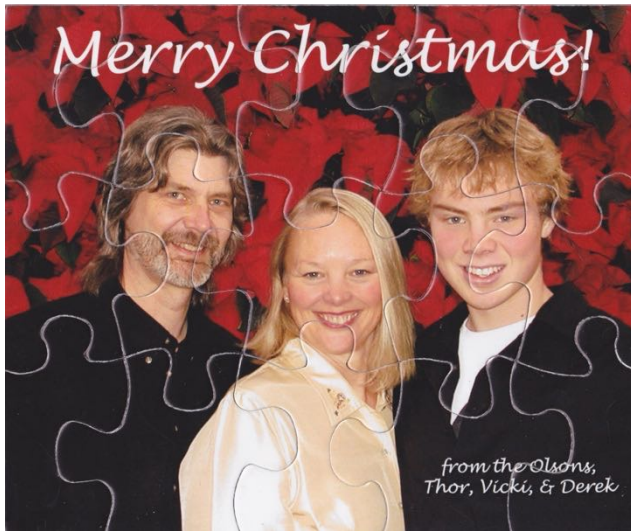
Early each holiday season, annual Christmas greeting cards were sent, a popular custom that connected people with their extended families, friends, and neighbors. Most cards featured pre-printed artwork and sentiments, but in the Olson tradition, they almost always included a photographic memento, a snapshot of the family in that year. Customizing photographic greeting cards took considerably more effort and expense, but provided an excuse for the family shutterbugs to use their camera equipment and apply their technical and creative skills. The tradition has lasted for generations and looks to continue to the next ones as well.



My grandparents' Christmas card, circa 1950



Our family Christmas photo for 1964, taken with a Polaroid camera, then reproduced and inserted into cards.



This 2003 Christmas card was presented as a jigsaw puzzle.



The Blitzer-Olson Christmas card photo for 2022, before the family expanded to six.

Another tradition occurred each year on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, when Ted and Grace made Swedish sausage. This was in preparation for the upcoming Christmas Eve dinner. They followed a traditional recipe that extends a supply of ground meat by adding chopped potato, celery, onions, and includes a Scandinavian-safe level of mild spices in the mix. Since "many hands make the work light," it became another excuse to gather the family to chop, grind, and press the mix into sausage casings. It was fun and novel to the younger members of the family and provided another good setting for taking pictures.



Maggie expresses her feelings about what came out of the sausage press (2009).

Swedish sausage was only one component of the Christmas Eve dinner at Ted and Grace's home. There was also the *shinka* (technically "Julskinka", Swedish Christmas ham), and of course, lutefisk. Potatoes and cream gravy made it a mostly white plate of food, which was savored by the elders from the old country and their children, but it was unusual food for the youngest family members, for whom dinner was simply a delay of the anticipated highlight of the evening: opening gifts!

Eventually, the seemingly endless delays ended; the snow pudding dessert was served, the table cleared, and the dishes washed. Everyone assembled around the Christmas tree, and the family patriarch distributed the gifts beneath it in ceremonial fashion, one at a time to each recipient, with an audience and, of course, the family photographers, witnessing and recording as each package was opened.



The traditional Christmas Eve dinner ending: snow pudding served on plates with candles while we sing "Silent Night".

The honor of hosting Christmas Eve eventually passed on to subsequent generations. Ted and Grace's modest South Minneapolis bungalow became too small for the growing family. It could accommodate their grandchildren, but when great-grandchildren came along, it reached and exceeded full occupancy. Tod and Jackie, with their larger suburban house in Long Lake, became the hosts for the annual event. Eventually, even that venue became strained. The Christmas Eve celebration split into multiple parties as the family expanded.

At the Long Lake house, several new traditions were initiated and established. One of them was the "flashlight walk". With many young children in the family, it became difficult for them to wait through the delays between dinner and the opening of Christmas presents. Tables needed clearing and dishes needed washing; this was not negotiable, but it turns out that a critical number of impatient young children can make that interlude rather unpleasant.

So a plan was devised. Immediately after the snow pudding had been served and dinner was officially complete, Uncle Thor, sometimes with a few other adults, led the children on a hike through the neighborhood while the dishes were cleared and washed. To make it even more compelling, each child was instructed to bring along a flashlight for just this purpose. It was a simple outing, basically walking around the block, but the walks were a big hit. What kid doesn't love walking around at night with a flashlight? And by the time we were back, the dishes were done, and we were all ready for the highlight of the evening.

Except, there was one more delay to be endured before the gifts could be opened.

The other tradition that originated in Long Lake was the Christmas Eve group photo. Tod's photographic interests were similar to a documentarian; he was eager to make a recording for posterity. He was the first to attempt gathering the entire family together to fit into a single picture. It was a painful process; everyone had their conversations and activities interrupted as they were herded into a room to face his tripod-mounted camera. In our family, such a feat was no easy task, and once ushered into the room, some subjects would suddenly vanish again, distracted away, or attending to some child's emergency or other crisis.

Eventually, everyone was in position, but for how long? The camera used a 10-second mechanical timer so that Tod had time to get into position after tripping the shutter. Of course, one exposure was not enough, in case someone blinked or had a finger in their nose. So multiple exposures were needed, each requiring the timer to be reset while the subjects stayed in place. How much patience did the youngest members have? It was a delicate judgment call to know when the cast was about to rebel and abandon the stage.

The annual Christmas Eve group photo became a tradition, one that everyone loved to hate. It was amusing and frustrating, but we all became accustomed to it and even came to grudgingly enjoy it. It eventually got to the point where it was entirely expected, and if we weren't corralled soon after dinner, we wondered what was wrong. Everyone knew we couldn't open gifts before the group photo was taken!

This album presents those group photos over the years. Not every year is included; some seem to have been lost to the photo shoeboxes of history. The original negatives may be somewhere buried in the archives, but are now too deep to recover. Fortunately, prints were made and distributed, although those too are mostly dispersed. Tod kept the most recent one on display at the home in Long Lake. Each year, he would update it, placing the new one on top of the stack of old ones backing it in the frame. When, after 50 years as the center of a family's life and activities, the house was prepared for sale, the historic stash of photos was discovered.

Each photo is presented by the year it was taken, ranging from 1986 to 2024. There is a companion image that annotates the family members in the picture, and sometimes some notes about it. Watch the family grow as children become adults and then have children of their own. The family tree of four generations can help you figure out the relationships between them. Feel free to augment it as the family expands.

As you peruse the pictures, you may have distinct memories or stories about them. I encourage you to write them down in the margins. It will make the book all the more valuable to whomever later encounters it!

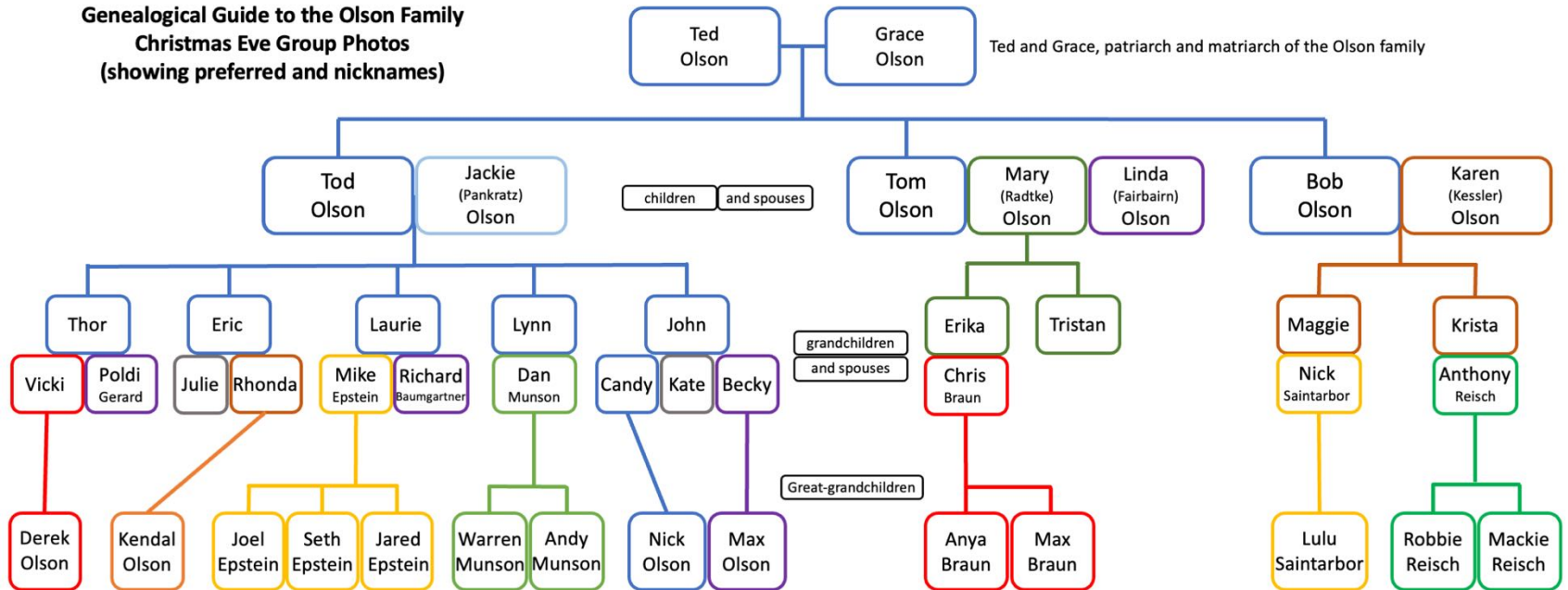
Thor Olson
2025

The Olson Family

Christmas Group Photos

A Family Christmas Eve tradition

Genealogical Guide to the Olson Family
Christmas Eve Group Photos
(showing preferred and nicknames)





Notes (1986):

- At Tod and Jackie's home at 292 Heather Lane, Long Lake MN
- This is the earliest group photo we have found
- Theo Pankratz is Jackie's mother, who visits from her home in Mountain Lake MN
- Christmas Eve was first hosted in Long Lake in 1984, but no group photo has been found.



1986



Notes (1988):

- Long Lake MN
- Lynn provides rabbit ears for Dan
- Eric is divorced from Julie, and now lives in Idaho Falls, but attends the Christmas gathering



1988



Notes (1990):

- Long Lake MN
- Jared joins the group



1990



Notes (1991):

- Long Lake MN
- New arrival: Warren
- Mike, Joel, and Jared seem to be missing this year
- John is with his future wife, Kate.



1991



Notes (1992):

- Long Lake MN
- Eric joins us again



1992



Notes (1993):

- Long Lake MN



1993



Notes (1993, Christmas Day)

- The Christmas Day gathering at Bob and Karen Olson's home in St Louis Park
- Tod, Tom, and Bob with their parents, Ted and Grace, and their families



1993 – Christmas Day



Notes (1994):

- Long Lake MN
- Eric and his new wife Rhonda are in town with Rhonda's son Keith



1994



Notes (1995):

- Long Lake MN
- Andy arrives



1995



Notes (1997):

- Long Lake MN
- This is an early digital photo recovered from an early digital print.



1997



Notes (1998):

- Long Lake MN
- This photo correctly identified by Lynn, who has records of what her boys wore each year.
- Another early digital photo, recovered from a low resolution print.



1998



Notes (2000):

- Long Lake MN
- Ted and Grace join us on Christmas Eve
- Laurie has married Richard Baumgartner



2000



Notes (2001):

- Long Lake MN



2001



Notes (2004):

- Long Lake MN
- Ted is gone (2002) but Grace (age 97) joined us
- John has married Becky with daughter Alecia, and their daughter Maggie is being held by Richard



2004



Notes (2005)

- Long Lake MN
- Tod and Bob's branches of the family merge again for the Christmas Eve holiday
- Eric, Rhonda and Kendal visit from Idaho.



2005



Notes (2006):

- Bob and Karen's home in St Louis Park MN



2006



Notes (2007):

- Long Lake MN
- The joint Christmas Eve party returns to Tod and Jackie's home.



2007



Notes (2008):

- The venue changes to Thor and Vicki's home in Minnetonka MN
- Tod and Jackie are in Idaho, celebrating with Eric's family.
- Some attendees show off the marshmallow guns that they built that evening



2008



Notes (2009):

- Minnetonka MN
- Tod shuttles between his ham stations in Idaho Falls and Long Lake, and is in MN for Christmas.
- Jackie prefers to stay in Idaho.



2009



Notes (2010):

- Minnetonka MN
- No group picture found for this year
- This is half of the group enjoying snow pudding by candle light



2010



Notes (2011):

- Idaho Falls ID
- Thor and Vicki separate; Thor spends Christmas in Idaho Falls with his parents and brother Eric's family.
- The Christmas group photo tradition continues.



2011



Notes (2012):

- At Bob's home in St Louis Park MN (Karen passed away in 2010)
- The Minnesota Olsons gather again
- Derek is with future wife Amy
- Thor is with future wife Poldi



2012



Notes (2013):

- St Louis Park MN
- This is a “hats and antlers” group photo salvaged from a facebook post



2013



Notes (2014):

- St Louis Park MN
- This is a “crowns and goggles” group photo, also salvaged from a facebook post



2014



Notes (2015):

- St Louis Park MN



2015



Notes (2017):

- St Louis Park MN
- Maggie is with husband Nick
- Krista is with new husband Anthony
- Another generation appears: Teddy and Charlie



2017



Notes (2018):

- St Louis Park MN
- No group photo has been found
- This is part of the family celebrating with snow pudding dessert



2018



Notes (2021):

- St Louis Park MN
- One year post-Covid; we are immunized.
- Joel and future wife Faaria expand the family
- Arthur, Will, and Covid babies Wally and Madeline are present



2021



Notes (2022):

- St Louis Park MN
- Bob passed away in September.
- Maggie and Krista are now in San Diego, so their tenant, Seth, is the host.



2022



Notes (2023):

- St Louis Park MN
- Maggie and Krista remain in CA.
- More new members: Isaac and Lawrence



2023



Notes (2024):

- St Louis Park MN
- Jared provides the Christmas photo backdrop and takes subgroup photos



2024

Epilogue

The family shutterbugs captured photos at every Christmas Eve gathering. They documented the kitchen activities as dinner was being prepared, the casual conversations as family members caught up with the latest news, and groups of children as they impatiently awaited the evening events. And of course, there were pictures of everyone in their holiday outfits, especially comparisons of the best and worst Christmas sweaters and Santa socks. Here are some samples.



Ted and Grace on Christmas Eve in their Minneapolis home. They teased each other about their Scandinavian heritage (1977).



Lynn at the piano, singing carols with her siblings (1966).



Fourteen years later, Lynn continues her accompaniment, this time with cousins Tristan and Erika (1980). To this day, she remains a skilled pianist, able to sight-read on demand for any holiday event.



Miss Piggie appears, thrilling Maggie (1980).



Christmas is for kids. Here is Tristan helping Maggie open a gift as Erika looks on. Newborn Krista is also nearby, at the other end of her bottle (1982).



Matriarchs Grace and Theo enjoying snow pudding and cookies. Grace had recently fallen down her basement stairs, breaking both wrists. This was another reason she was not hosting the Christmas Eve dinner (1984).



After some light assembly, Maggie inspects her new baby carriage.



Santa showed up this year. He seems to be fond of Maggie and especially Laurie (1984).



Uncle Eric, using his wrestling skills, restrains Derek from inspecting the unopened gifts (1986).



Krista, Joel, and Maggie, innocent of any mischief on Christmas Eve (1985).



Nick and Joel, busy (1986).



Warren, Andy, and Seth, biding their time.. Their holiday attire helped Lynn correctly identify the dates of these photos (1997).



Jackie and Vicki in the kitchen as dinner is prepared (2007).



After crafting and customizing personal marshmallow guns, a house-wide gunfight ensued (2008).



Tod prepares for another Christmas Eve group photo (2009).



Krista tells a joke... in her inimitable style (2011)



Dice game dynamics (2012).



On this year, there were costumes (2012).



Christmas socks are compared (2013).



Seth, bedecked for Christmas (2015).



Maggie, Krista, and Amy, sporting their Christmas sweaters. (2018)



Maggie prepares Swedish sausage and meatballs (2017).



At every Christmas, there is a kids' table where the most fun happens (2024).

Addendum: Early Olson Christmas Cards



1958. Christmas in Michigan, while Tod pursued a Master's degree. Married six years with four children. Newborn Lynn is on Jackie's lap.



1959, one year later. Photo taken in Ted and Grace's home. Lynn is one year old.

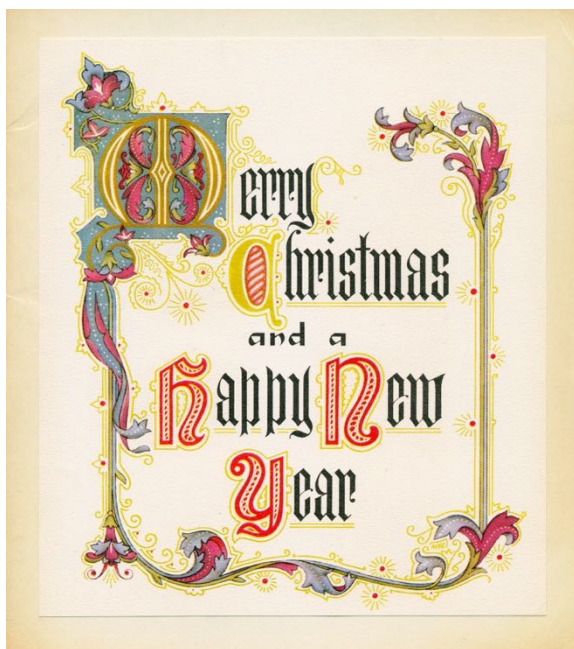


Merry Christmas
Happy New Year

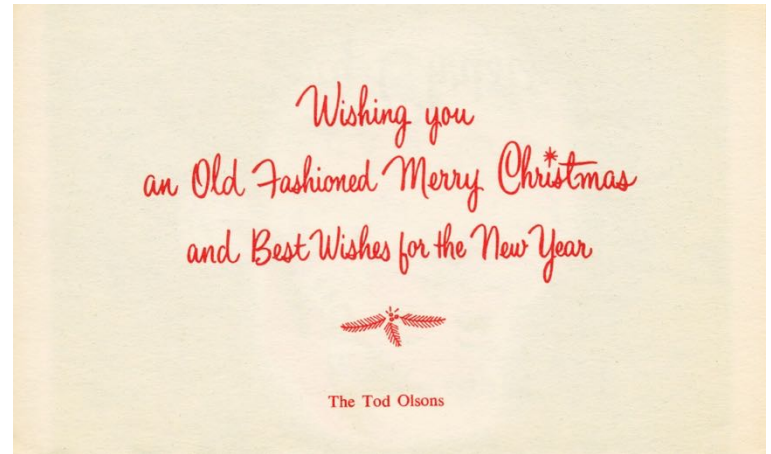
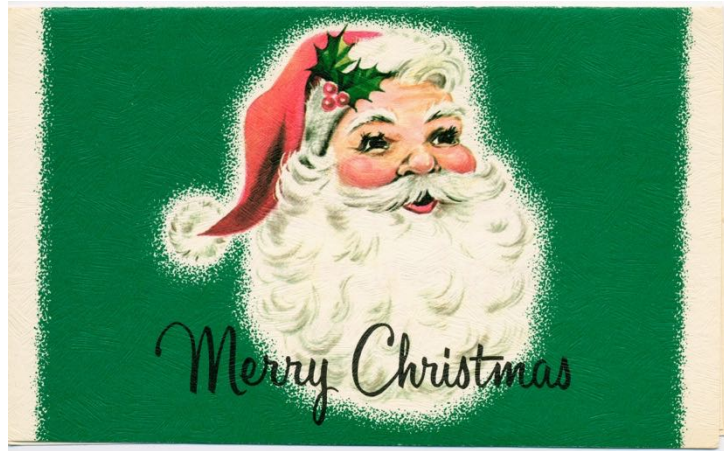


Tod & Jackie Olson
& Children

1962. In our house at 3929 Yosemite Ave, St Louis Park. John is 3 months old. We are wearing sweaters brought back from Norway by Ted and Grace.



1964. Photo taken at Thanksgiving by a Polaroid instant camera, then copies placed into photo-insert cards



1966. A staged photo taken at our new house in Long Lake at "Rural Route 2, Box 619", later renamed to 292 Heather Lane.



1969. A surly group of teenagers (except smiling John), no longer willing to pose for their dad's camera.

The last time we managed
to capture all 5 at one time
last Christmas.

Standing: Lynn, 11 + Eric, 15
Seated: Thor, 16, John 7 + Laurel,
13

Tod + Jackie Olson

Jackie inscribed on the back:

"The last time we managed to capture all 5 at one time - last Christmas.

"Standing - Lynn, 11 + Eric, 15.

"Seated - Thor 16, John, 7 + Laurel, 13."



1970. A photo montage created by Thor in his basement bedroom/darkroom.



1971. Photo taken at Ted and Grace's home (4752 16th Ave S, Minneapolis). The print has not aged well and shows stains.



1973. Probably not in a Christmas card, but the photo was taken at Christmas 1973.



1974. In the living room at the Long Lake house.



Christmas Wishes

THE OLSONS

1975. Yes, this was the clothing fashion in the seventies.



1976. With the previous pictures, all four walls of the Long Lake living room have been used as the backdrop.

Addendum 2: Sibling Photos



1972. In the backyard of the Long Lake house.



1981. Sibling photo with spouses Mike and Vicki. Rugby shirts were popular that year.



*1982. The siblings and spouses posed in front of the Scandinavian flag-bedecked Christmas tree.
This is what we looked like in 1982.*



1994. Sibling photo at Christmas, before the full group photo was taken. John, Lynn Laurie, Eric, Thor. Evidently we were positioned by reverse birth order.



2011. We make this group photo as a Christmas gift to our mother, Jackie.



2019. Jackie dies with all her children around her. We take another picture, recreating the original, placed on the mantel behind us.



2023. Eric was in town and attended a birthday party for Laurie at Lynn and Dan's house, the site of the very first picture of the series that started in 2011. It can be seen in the background of the photo on the mantel, which itself was taken in 2019 in Idaho Falls in the days after Jackie's death. This will be the last sibling photo to include all of us. Laurie passed away in 2025.

