

Newport

Before the bridge

CHARLES PINNING

WHEN MOTHER unwrapped the Advent calendar and set it up in the living room on top of the radiator cover, winter had arrived and the countdown to Christmas began.

You opened a new window on the calendar each day, folding back the thin cardboard shutters to reveal a biblical scene leading up to the birth of Christ — unless your older brother had snuck in a photo of a naked woman.

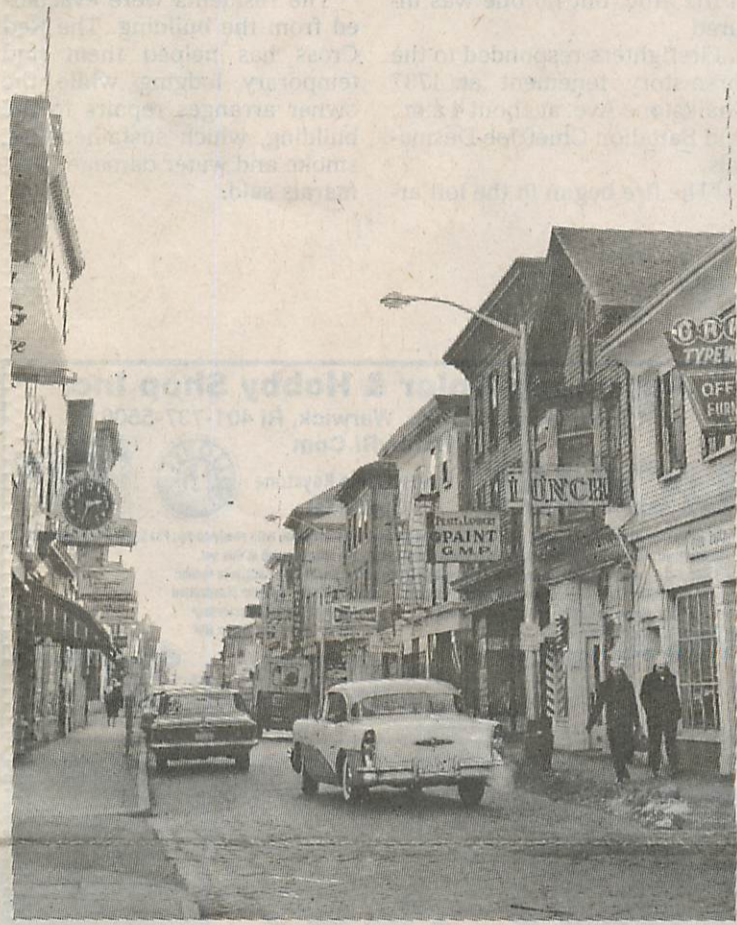
The first snows came in December, and the weather turned genuinely cold. We would go ice-skating at night at the Sachuest Skating Club, which used the outdoor rink at St. George's School, high on the hill overlooking Second Beach. Many nights it was bitterly cold, but that never stopped us. We skated around and around to the music under the lights, and then clump-clump-clumped into the hot house when our feet got numb. I remember the silhouettes of giant pine trees, and the air, sweet and salty at the same time.

I fell in love with Mallory Barber at the rink. She was older than I by a couple of years. Like a dog, I trailed her around at what I thought was a safe distance. One night, she skated over to me and said, "You know, I don't love you." Then she added, "The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

It was a time to experiment with new words and urges. Like your clothes when you're 11, life was either too big or too small. We took drives at night to see the lights and the decorations. Ranch houses usually had the most gaudy displays, with plastic junk all over the lawn and Santa and his reindeers streaming cockeyed across the roof. The proud Victorians on upper Kay Street and around Touro Park had the most tasteful displays, a simple but lush wreath or garlands and strings of single-color lights, usually white.

"Very elegant," my mother would say. We, of course, had chubby multi-color lights. What self-respecting kid wants all white lights — unless he's destined to work for Martha, or do window displays at Tiffany's?

The mansions along Bellevue Avenue and Ocean Drive were



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Thames Street, Newport, circa 1960.

dark. Most were still intact and owned by the rich, who had gone away for the winter. Christmas was for regular folk: Leona Helm-sley's "little people," who did their own taxes and even paid them, and bought Christmas trees that weren't perfect.

The Newport Bridge wasn't lit up, because — ta da! — there was no bridge. The bridges and deck railings of the destroyers and tenders at the Naval Base piers were strung with lights. Before its exit, the Navy fleet sustained Newport. There was no need for a bridge and tourists, if there ever was.

"Only" ferry service existed between Newport and Jamestown, which "only" saved the town from the rapacious Connecticuters and New Yorkers and New Jerseyites, who, having to loop around Providence, found it easier to keep on going and trample Cape Cod instead.

Best was downtown. Thames Street, the whole stretch from Washington Square to the bottom of the Fifth Ward, was a one-way, narrow cobblestone street, bounded on both sides by old wooden buildings. The scar that today is called America's Cup Avenue was not even a nightmare yet. Edward's Sporting Goods, where I bought all of my baseball gloves and bats, was on Thames. Ed Goldberg was a nice Jewish man who I doubt held anything against Christmas, as was my pediatrician, Dr. Abramson. I loved these men. They treated me like a son.

Lights were strung above Thames Street, and driving beneath them with the tires rumbling on the cobble stones and the heater cranking and the smell of wool filling the car, you felt triumphant, like de Gaulle or Eisenhower. Maybe this was what it felt like to go to Disneyland, in Anaheim, Calif.

Thames Street had a W.T. Grant's and a Woolworth's. I went in with my mother and wandered around or sat at the fountain while she looked at dress patterns and bought sewing supplies. We bought "white bark" at the Fanny Farmer store that made its own chocolate. White chocolate in a white bag — very elegant.

Around the corner, on Spring Street at Ward's Printers, we picked out Christmas cards. The Wards lived up the street from us, on Whitwell Avenue, in a little Cape Cod house even smaller than ours. Everybody then lived in small houses, except for the doctors and lawyers and the rich who had repaired to Palm Beach or Chamonix.

Christmas Day would finally arrive. The living room was stacked with presents, most of them soon forgotten. But every year we received one or two things we really wanted. The bike. The microscope. The home pinball machine out of the Sears catalog! We never got everything we wanted, but always enough. There were disappointments, but you survived.

Truthfully, the best part of Christmas was after Christmas. As the trees were discarded, my brother and I and our friends would scour the streets and drag them back to the field behind our house and pile them high. On the designated night, everyone from the neighborhood would gather and my father would ignite them, and we stood in a circle and watched the bonfire.

Your feet were cold standing in the frozen snow, and your face was hot. People on the other side of the fire miraged.

In the summer, you would pick blackberries from this field, and build forts. But tonight you just stood there and looked into the fire, noticing an ornament someone had forgotten to remove . . . tinsel . . . wondering why Mallory Barber didn't love you . . . never did anything to her. . . You wondered if your eyebrows were getting singed and stepped back a foot. You saw your father smiling, and glimpsed what he looked like as a boy. Nobody could imagine that one day this whole field would be nothing but solid houses. We, the regular people, were just living our lives.

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer.