

NOT A NORMAN ROCKWELL CHRISTMAS

There are few things in life as comforting as a traditional Christmas spent with family and friends. At least, that's what I hear.

As usual, last week about fifteen members of my extended family had an early-afternoon Christmas dinner at my folks' house on the edge of the Coralville reservoir. Things were progressing normally until I noticed smoke billowing out of the kitchen.

I sprinted towards the kitchen - wondering about my health insurance coverage - when my mother called out, "Oh, I have something in the oven. I really should clean it some day." I could hear my dad saying, "That's how I know when dinner's ready - the smoke alarms go off."

Dinner itself was uneventful, until our traditional after-dinner hike around the edge of the frozen Coralville Lake.

I had a cold and didn't join the group, but the next thing I see is Connie (my sister-in-law) being carried back up the hill. She had managed to break her left leg in two places (as it turned out) after slipping on the ice.

Back in the house she cast off her winter clothing, and her scarf ended up too near a candle where it immediately caught on fire. After that was extinguished, she professed to being in significant pain and expressed a fervent desire to be taken to the nearest emergency room. Doug, her attentive husband responded, "But we haven't had dessert yet."

Gus - the big yellow Labrador retriever brought by Connie to go on the hike - began galloping around the living room in exuberant dog-fashion because of all the excitement, eventually jumping clear over the chair containing "Old" Connie, my 98-year-old grandmother.

She began having difficulty breathing as a result, so a team was dispatched to take her back to the assisted living home. Gus was banished to the

screened-in porch, where he promptly ate a large almond-encrusted cheese ball we had set out there to keep cold.

Gary (my brother-in-law) slung Young Connie over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and deposited her in another car, which took Doug and her to the Mercy emergency room, where the orthopedic surgeon turned out to be their new neighbor. Yet another team wrestled Gus into an SUV and took the hyperactive dog home.

The few of us who remained had been instructed to prepare dessert for the eventual return of the uninjured guests. It involved whipping real whipped cream, which none of us men had ever done before (no aerosol can?). Gary assembled the electric mixer and accidentally turned it on while checking to see if the beaters were locked in, catching his thumb in them.

The thumb was not greatly damaged, although the tines of the beaters were severely warped. They were subsequently bent back into something approaching their original shape, allowing us to make whipped cream despite the spattering, clattering and vibrating due to out-of-balance beaters.

Kelli - my 13-year old niece - was also one of the few of us remaining, and got out her X-Box video entertainment system, inviting me to play. Having not played video games since Pac-Man (hey, gramps!), I was amazed –the graphics and sound are unbelievable.

We started out with a Karate simulation, which had a mind-boggling list of options. I chose to be a young, muscular male avatar, and as my competitor my niece chose to be a striking young female Xena-like warrior, handicapped by huge breasts barely contained in her skintight costume.

The complicated controller mechanisms we used each had two joysticks, seven colored buttons, two triggers and a 4-way rocker switch – way too many gadgets for your average clueless 50-year-old.

By randomly pressing all buttons and pushing all joysticks as quickly as possible, I was able to avoid being pounded into hamburger for almost ten seconds.

Next, I tried the road race simulation with Max (my 15-year old nephew) who could barely disguise his amusement at my ineptness. He made supportive comments like, "You're going the wrong direction," and "I didn't know it was possible for someone to get lapped on this course."

The NFL football program was worse, precipitating observations like, "Your punt went only seven yards," and "that was the worst pass play I've ever seen". He finally took pity on me and started telling me in advance what play he was going to run or what defense he was going to use. With this advantage I lost by only six touchdowns.

Mercifully, the other family members (except the two Connies) returned and spared me further embarrassment.

I'm already looking forward to next year's traditional family Christmas, which I strongly suspect will NOT include baked foods, after dinner walks, dogs, electric mixers or video games.