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Christmas Eve Yarn Balls

Susan Swan
susie.swan@hotmail.com

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Holiday Custom

Informant: Jason Swan is my father and is the youngest son of Susan (Sam) Swan. Jason was born in Tacoma, Washington but was raised in Eugene and Bend Oregon. When he was 8 years old his mother, Sam, got re-married to a man named David Swan. Jason was an excellent student and loved to ski. He Graduated high school in 1988 and then came here to Utah State to study history. He switched his major several times, and finally graduated in 1998 with a bachelor degree in Instructional Design. He continued his education and gained a masters in Instructional design in 2001. He married Jamie Swan in 1993 and together they have 5 children; 4 daughters and 1 son. I am the second eldest. He now works for a company called L-3 Communications, which has brought him and his family to live in North Carolina for several years and now to Arlington, Texas where they have been for nearly 7 years. Jason is a proud father and is a wonderful provider and patriarch of the home. Family is his everything, and traditions among family are something he holds very dear.

Context: I interviewed Jason last week over FaceTime. As he lives in Texas so it is hard for me to visit all the time. He was wonderful enough to agree to FaceTime me to help me collect this piece of Holiday folklore. I was in my office at work when we started the call, and he was at his home in Arlington in the living room. As it gets closer to the holidays, we are both getting more and more excited for me to come home for Christmas. We began the discussion about the holidays and it led to talking about my dad’s tradition of Christmas Eve Yarn balls. This is one of my absolute favorite customs in my family. And it is a tradition he shares all the time and we all love to brag about. I hope you all enjoy it as much as we do.

Text: J: okay. *clears throat* Well. uh.*clears throat* First Christmas I can remember, it was in bend I don’t remember how old I was but I couldn’t have been more than 3 or 4. It was before we knew grandpa Dave. Grandma Sam and I were with a friend her name was Becky. And Becky gave me (I think it was Becky. I’m pretty sure it was Becky) *clears throat* I remember the apartments that we were living in *clears throat* I remember we were sitting on the floor and my friend Becky brought me this yarn ball and as I wrapped it I can remember little plastic toy soldiers falling out in little bits of candy and stuff. And I remember it was fun and it was really kind of cool. I don’t know it was when I met your mom for our first Christmas “together” I
guess it was after we were married. So, it was after we were married. We were at her parents place and I gave her I wanted to give her a watch because she was studying to be a nurse believe it or not. And um she needed a watch and so I got her a pretty little citizen watch I thought she’d like. And uh instead of just wrapping it in a box I decided to put it in a yarn ball. I don’t know why I thought about that and so I wrapped it up in yarn and put some little toys and candy and stuff inside of it and it was about the size of a bowling ball. Anyway, she got it Christmas day uh she and her family were just kind of excited about the whole thing and it kind of made everybody laugh and your mom just loved it and when we started having kids she wanted me to do it for them. so, you got the first kid ball I don’t know if we did it your first Christmas but definitely your second Christmas and every year after that all you kids got yarn balls. That became daddy’s gift.

M: well it’s one of my favorite Christmas memories and traditions

J: Yeah mine too

M; absolutely. So, um can you describe your process in making the yarn balls each year?

J: uh Yeah. It starts with finding a gift and deciding what I want to get my children and it has to fit inside the yarn ball um and then we go buy the yarn and the candy and stuff before Christmas. *clears throat* and then usually the night before Christmas eve we sit down and start wrapping yarn balls and it takes me a few hours to them all done and I like to find little toys and stuff, little plastic things and rubbery stuff and these little things to wrap inside the yarn little cars, little balms, or little candy pieces stuff just fun stuff to put inside the balls as I wrap them. Of course, the main gift is in the middle.

M: where- (talks over each other briefly)
J: -and I always use green or red yarn and it sometimes. When I’m feeling particularly clever I make it so kids have to figure out which ball is theirs.

M; what are some of those that you’ve done in the past?

J: some of what?

M; the clever things that you’ve done to help us figure out which yarn ball is ours.

J: well I I’m not terribly clever. So, I’ve only done it a few times and I know it seems like, it probably seems to you like I’ve done it every time. You know one time I put knots in the string. So, one knot for you, 2 knots for Becca, 3 knots for Katie, and 4 for Xander. Or I’ve maybe tell a riddle that identifies somehow or somehow identifies. Maybe I hide the yarn ball and give you a clue so everybody has a separate clue to help you find the yarn ball. Uh-

M: I remember one year Becca’s was in the dryer. Haha

J; Yeah. Yeah. I don’t know it’s a I think every year it gets more challenging to do something unique.

M: mhmm

J: I guess I’m not that clever. Haha

M; umm. Is does mom have a role to play with this tradition?

J: oh, hers is probably the most important. She’s the one that nags me to do it so I can get it done in time.

M; yup. It’s very important.

J: Yeah.

M: okay um another question. Um. What did you put in my yarn ball this year?
J: that’s a very good question because I haven’t even done it yet. And of course, the yarn balls were always a Christmas eve tradition.

M: of course. Um is there any other memory, like specific memory of the yarn ball that you’d like to share at this time? Maybe of one night, maybe um like say the first, my first yarn ball. Describe that night if you remember?

Texture: At the beginning of the interview call we laughed and joked with each other for several minutes before actually getting into the questions. He was sitting in his favorite armchair and wearing his “old man” glasses he despises so much. It has gotten to the point where he needs them to even see my face as we video chatted with each other. From the angle of the camera I got a perfect view of his “silver chin”. He wears his facial hair as a goatee and his wisdom (not age of course) has turned his normally raven black hair to silver with spots of white in the center of his chin. We often tease him about it, but truthfully it is something that endears him even more to us. Throughout the interview he clears his throat a lot, he may have caught a bit of the December bug. But as he told his story about the yarn balls and how they came to be, his eyes twinkled and there was a constant smile on his face. I could tell from this interview and from previous discussions with Jason that this is something he holds dear to his heart and is one of his most favorite traditions to do with his family each year. This custom is very much HIS tradition and as he tells me, there is a certain pride and joy in his voice that tells the details of how this custom has come to be and how he has continued it today.