

A feeling of magic remained on the dimly lit bus

■ Lydia Becker recalls a trip 50 years ago when a passenger's wartime tragedy transformed a busload of strangers

By Susan Vanney
Post-Crescent staff writer

Lydia Becker still gets choked up thinking about Christmas 1944. "All those ships passing in the night, it just always goes through your mind," Becker says. "I think about it a lot at Christmas. It's supposed to be such a merry time, and all of a sudden I get caught up in this memory and it brings me right back."

Becker — that's Miss Lydia to her friends — is the winner of The Post-Crescent's Christmas memories contest. Becker was a physical education teacher in Wausau for 35 years, returning in 1980 to Appleton, her childhood home. After her sister died in 1991, she moved to Peabody Manor retirement home, where she's as quick-witted and independent as ever. But 50 years ago today, Becker was 36 years old and traveling by bus to Virginia, Minn., to visit a college friend. "It's a story I haven't really told much," she said. "Once in a while I'll say, 'Christmas always reminds me of....' But not too often. 'I was shocked when The Post-Crescent called me. I thought that

CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

not many people would be interested in this old thing. They are filled with their own memories they love."

Becker will be spending Christmas this year with her niece and nephew, Ann and Robert Schneider of Hortonville. She said her memories of the dimly-lit bus, the crush of the passengers and the beauty of the hymns won't be far away.

CHRISTMAS MEMORY

The night bus slowly climbed the steep hill leading out of Duluth to

Please see **BUS, BACK PAGE**

■ **More memories:**
C-1



Post-Crescent photo by Michael Luschman

LYDIA BECKER recalls a bus trip she took in 1944. "It's a story I haven't really told much. Once in a while I'll say, 'Christmas always reminds me of....' But not too often."

12/25/94

"Post-Crescent"

Bus broke out in song

From A-1

the old Miller Trunk Highway. It was wartime, gasoline was rationed, the public conveyances were usually crowded and late, and this bus, going to the Iron Range of Minnesota, was no exception. Many of the passengers were not too happy over the situation and were not hesitant in expressing their dissatisfactions.

As the hum of conversation ceased and passengers settled down, the low, uncontrolled sobbing of a woman and the crying of a child could be heard. The woman had evidently just received word of her husband's death in the war, and through her sobbing, was trying to talk to her little boy — "Daddy is gone," "How can we tell Grandma?," "Daddy is never coming home again," "Poor Daddy," "Why won't Daddy come home?," "Where is Grandma?"

The other passengers became very quiet — as if realizing that their own petty inconveniences were nothing compared to this tragedy. The man across the aisle stepped down, spoke a few words to the woman, lifted the little boy, cradled him in his lap, stroked his

head and tried to soothe him. Someone in the rear of the bus started to sing — so softly — "O Holy Night." A few others joined in the singing. This was followed by "Silent Night" and almost the entire busload sang the familiar carol. There had been no practice. There was no director. There was no accompaniment — yet it was the most beautiful rendition of these songs that I have ever heard.

The singing ended, but a feeling of magic remained. The child slept in the stranger's arms, the woman's sobs subsided. There was a feeling of warmth, of shared sadness and concern, of "oneness," of "kinship" such as is rarely experienced by a group of strangers. The almost full moon broke through the clouds, and the dark night became almost like day — enhancing the beauty of the snow-laden trees, and casting shadows on the deep snow. The bus slowed as if the driver was reluctant to reach his destination — reluctant to have the magic end.

This was my most memorable Christmas Eve — 50 years ago — spent in a crowded bus, traveling over a lonely road through the snow and forests of northern Minnesota.

-Lydia Becker
Appleton