

How We Kept Christmas

by Roland Foster

"... [Scrooge] knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge." — Charles Dickens

Mother loved Christmas, and so of course we all did. It was the high point of our year, the season around which all else revolved, and the kickoff event of the season was an all-day expedition to find just the right Christmas tree. Mother would plan where to go — we knew the woods well, from berry-picking times — and Daddy, or one of us boys as we got old enough, would drive the old Jeep pickup. We would start out fairly close to the farm, looking in the likely places, and we would try to remember where the best tree was that we had seen so far. After three or four hours and many miles of sandy woods roads, we would go back and find that best tree again, and cut it down. I remember a few times that the tree wasn't "as nice as last year," but mostly they were fine short-needle pines, symmetrical and full, and just about tall enough to touch the ceiling.

The tree was placed in a big bucket of wet sand, to keep it from drying out. We trimmed it lovingly with lots of colored lights, then ornaments — some were treasures from my parents' newlywed days; others were bought at the dime store or handmade — and finally hundreds of tinsel "icicles," each one placed individually so it would hang down and look "real." Our tree was always up by mid-December, and stayed up until about January 6th. We didn't know about Epiphany; we just liked having the tree around for a long time. Sometimes we would mix up a batch of homemade eggnog, turn on the tree lights, and just sit and talk.

Mother would spend days making her famous carrot cakes. These were beautifully moist fruitcakes made with grated carrots, flour, raisins, dates, nuts, some candied fruit, wonderful spices, and lots of love. Each cake, in its own give-away aluminum loaf pan, was topped with a folded paper towel and anointed with a half-cup or so of good apricot brandy, then wrapped in colorful Christmas foil. Mother made them in batches of five, and gave them generously to friends, neighbors, family members, and other favored souls. One friend always received two cakes, one for right away, which was shared with his wife, and one that was his to savor sparingly for weeks to come.

Christmas gifts were a problem, as they are still today. Picking just the right gift for a loved one takes either divine guidance or a special talent. This is true whether you have ten dollars to spend for six gifts, as we did in those days, or today's lofty credit limits. I remember one Christmas, when I was about ten years old, finding just the right gift for Daddy — something affordable that I knew he would like. It was a miniature bottle of Old Granddad that was on display in the window of the local liquor store. You can imagine my shock and dismay when the man not only wouldn't sell it to me, but yelled at me and told me to get out of his store!

Not having much money, we often made our gifts, or found them. One Christmas morning brother Bill and I got up very early to go duck hunting. We bagged no ducks that day, but I spotted a present I knew Mother would like. On an island about a hundred feet

from shore was a lovely Florida holly tree. It was a cold day, for Florida, and the water came over the tops of my rubber boots, but I waded out anyway and got Mother a nice branch of holly to decorate her Christmas table.

Ah, yes, Christmas dinner. The main attraction, of course, was the biggest turkey that would fit in our oven — usually around 25 pounds. With stuffing (we always called it "dressing"), potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, two or three vegetables, Mother's angel biscuits, and at least two kinds of homemade pie, it was as fine a meal as anyone could wish for, and we enjoyed it to the very, very full.

And that was Christmas. It was a family time, a time to enjoy being together, to enjoy the pleasures of getting and especially giving gifts, to share a wonderful festive meal. We kept Christmas well, we thought, and enjoyed it tremendously. It makes me sad today to think that we left out the main ingredient — Jesus. Oh, yes, we knew it was His birthday, and we loved to go caroling and sing the wonderful Christmas songs, but "Up on the House Top" was as meaningful to us as "Away In a Manger."

I'm sure there must be many families today like we were — who have a giving, sharing approach to Christmas, and who think they "keep it well," but who leave Jesus out of their celebration. There are many who sing of the Babe in the manger, without recognizing Him as Emmanuel — God with us; who desire "peace on earth" without acknowledging the Prince of Peace. I hope they all will come to know, as most of my family has eventually come to know, the Christ of Christmas. Without Him at its center, Christmas is like a glass ornament — pretty on the outside, but hollow, without substance.

May your Christmases be filled with His presence, not just with fun and food and decorations and presents. God bless.