
Christmas—Southern Style

by Mitchell A. Tyner

My grandparents lived on the Old Place in Texas until I was about 10 years old, and all my early Christmas memories come from there. We lived in Shreveport, Louisiana, about 60 miles away. We were 18 miles from the state line, which was as far from Texas as my mother ever really cared to be. Although my parents always erected a Christmas tree at home, not later than Christmas Eve we bundled presents and family in the car and headed for Texas.

The family had already been in America for a while. Herr Kasselburg, my earliest known maternal ancestor, took passage from Germany to Pennsylvania in the late 17th century. Two of his descendants, using the name Castleberry, enlisted in the army of what was rapidly becoming the United States. True to long-standing military tradition, these Pennsylvanians were not sent to Valley Forge, but rather to the army of General Nathaniel Greene in Georgia. After the war, they surveyed their options and the climatic implications thereof and quite sensibly decided to stay south. One branch of the family kept moving farther south, founding the town of Casselberry, Florida. The other moved west, following the frontier first to Alabama and then into the Spanish province of Texas and finally to the Old Place.

From the time Andy Jackson lived at the south end of 16th Street in Washington, D.C., my family lived on this same piece of land. My great-great-great-grandfather bought a piece of sandy ground covered with pines, red oaks, and sweet gums and every subsequent generation of Castleberrys lived on what came to be called the Old Place.

As much as I wanted our journeys from Louisiana to Texas to resemble the illustrations in my reading books at school, they didn't. The books, having been written by Yankees, always showed people bundled up against the cold and driving over snowy terrain. If we had cold weather, a windbreaker jacket was sufficient. And on those rare occasions when we saw snow, it was in January or February, not December. You might *dream* of a white Christmas, but that was as far as you were going to get.

This relative balminess caused me great consternation. There was no snow upon which to land a sleigh and even if there was, my grandparents' house had no chimney! My parents patiently persuaded me that Santa Claus's strongest personality traits were tenacity and creativity and that I could trust him to work something out. And, of course, he did.

First order of business on Christmas morning was the long-awaited revelation of the contents of that great pile of packages beneath the tree. Adults admired the wrapping paper, the ribbon, the bow, the artistic combination thereof, shook the package, speculated on its contents and generally took an interminable amount of time getting into it. Being of a certain pragmatic bent from an early age, I considered that the sole function of all that stuff was to hold the package together until I could get into it, and therefore did so with considerable rapidity. (Type A behavior shows itself at an early age.)

But my elders managed to take up most of the morning with that process, and by the time the reusable bows were retrieved to safety and the remaining wrappings were reduced to rubbish and removed, it was about time for the next main event: Christmas dinner, served at dinnertime,

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which is to say between noon and 1:00 p.m. We were aware that some misguided souls in areas that mistakenly considered themselves more enlightened, thought of this meal as lunch. To us, lunch was something you ate out of a paper sack (not a bag, a sack).

Nothing approaching the contents of this meal ever came out of a sack lunch. There were so many dishes on that table there was hardly space

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left for the plates. My grandmother, a small, quite imperturbable soul, would typically produce four meats, four salads, assorted relishes, 10 vegetables, half a dozen desserts, and a variety of beverages. The table was so impressive that I once took a picture of it and then used the picture to inflict exquisite torture on my roommates during the lean winter months when the kitchen at Ozark Academy seemed to exist on government surplus cheese, beans, and rice.

The dishes on my grandmother's table were typically southern. Unheard of—and unmissed—were such things as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and rutabagas. But there would be fried okra, turnip greens, and peas: crowder peas, purple hull peas, cream peas, black-eyed peas—although the black-eyes were usually saved for the traditional southern New Year's meal of cornbread and black-eyed peas. I had never experienced cheesecake, and had seen a blueberry pie only once—brought to a church social by a transplant from Michigan. She was a Yankee, but she was also an Adventist and therefore to be tolerated. She was also to be pitied—she didn't know how to make a decent pecan pie or peach cobbler, without which Christmas was incomplete.

Before partaking of this feast, certain amenities were observed. My grandfather, who would

have shared a mutual animosity with the women's movement had he lived a few years longer, was nonetheless the family baker. For every occasion of any consequence it was he who produced the biscuits and cornbread. As the participants gathered at the table, he brought in his products, announcing what a sorry job he had done. Then my grandmother would opine that the whole meal was barely tolerable for human consumption and say, "I hope you can find something you can eat."

This last phrase was my mother's signal to begin her part in this antiphonal production: She remonstrated that each and every dish was unequalled in culinary elegance and excellence. This time, she allowed, the food preparers had just outdone themselves.

Then began what seemed an incredibly long period of passing every dish *on* the table to every person *at* the table, before the conclusion of which no serious eating could begin.

A few minutes later my mother would typically say, "Mitchell, don't you want some more potato?"—or whatever was at the two o'clock position from my plate. This question could not be answered with a simple, "No, thank you." Anyone with any breeding would understand that the real message conveyed was, "I want some more potatoes (or whatever) so pass them around again."

After coping with all this food, someone would pass around a plate of homemade pecan pralines (p'cahn prah-leens). In 1985 some General Conference people bought some imitations thereof in New Orleans (Nuahlans). Not nearly as good as homemade, of course. And they said they went to New Orleans (New Orleans) and bought pray-leens with pea-cans. To refer to pecans like that makes it sound like something not to be discussed in polite company.

In midafternoon, it was time for a bit of exercise, so everyone trooped out to walk over the Old Place. Through the woods and across the fields just to look at the land and reminisce about how things used to be.

Then shortly before dark began that most peculiarly southern of Christmas observances: fireworks. We set off firecrackers, Roman candles, star shells, the whole works, well into the evening. The smaller fry enjoyed it openly, but our fathers

had to join in for the supposed purpose of maintaining safety and order. No one had to ask them twice.

I wish I could tell you that the fireworks represented joyous celebration of the birth of the Christ child. But I can't. It's much closer to the truth to say that we simply enjoyed making noise. So Christmas fireworks stand in the grand tradition of the Rebel Yell of the last century.

For that matter, you may have noticed no mention of the Christ child anywhere in this account. The religious content of our holiday was a bit thin. Even when Christmas fell on Sabbath, it was not seen so much as an opportunity for a dual celebration as an impediment to shooting off the fireworks. Nevertheless, at the end of a day such

as I have described, there was a deeply satisfying feeling of peace on earth and goodwill to men. (After the fireworks, of course.)

Things have changed. My mother cooks broccoli. I have learned to enjoy Brussels sprouts and have developed an unfortunate affinity for cheesecake. My suburban Washington neighborhood would be scandalized by fireworks at Christmas. My grandmother is no longer able to produce those monstrous meals. She is in less than perfect health as she approaches her 94th Christmas. But sometime during this holiday season I expect that she'll carry out time-honored tradition. Somehow, she'll manage to set foot again on the Old Place. And, of course, we'll all eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day.