

## *Memories of Christmas*

Cinda King

When conversations turn to Christmas memories, certain questions usually rise to the top: Did you have a real or artificial tree? What was your favorite Christmas carol, food, or activity? Did Santa come to your house before you went to sleep on Christmas Eve or while you were sleeping? Were you usually in your own home on Christmas morning or did you travel? Did you have a part in the Christmas pageant?

During my childhood, Christmases were almost always the same scenario. Living in the same city with most of my relatives, it was easy to celebrate with my Dad's side on Christmas Eve and my Mom's on Christmas day. My grandparents' homes would be wall-to-wall with aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends.

Santa put us at the top of his itinerary so he could stop by our house while we were at my paternal grandparents' home on Christmas Eve. I am not exactly sure (even to this day) how it all happened, but we left the house dark and quiet only to find it ablaze with lights, color, and music when we returned. It would be a very late night for us as we enjoyed our new treasures, but we would jump out of bed bright and early on Christmas morning ready to spend the entire day at my maternal grandparents' home.

I was blessed to always have safe and consistent warmth around me on those special days. Even when times were hard and money was scarce, my parents never let us feel slighted or disappointed. Our gifts were seldom expensive, and never extravagant, but each was chosen, given, and received with love and gratitude.

Many of my memories run together, simply because we were in the same homes, with the same people, doing the same things year after year; but there are a few I would love to share with you over the next six weeks. My memories may not be extraordinary or even particularly unique, but, perhaps because of their common themes, they will remind you of special days and moments from your past.

I cannot wait to share stories such as *Christmas in Daylight*, *Joy to the World*, *Ms. Blake's Cookies*, *Falling Angels*, and *Footprints in the Snow*. Keep reading each week and be ready to share your own special *Memories of Christmas* at the SMBC Church-wide Dinner on December 5<sup>th</sup>!

## *Christmas in Daylight*

Cinda King

Every community has its own unique way of preparing for the holidays. Whether grand like Light Up Louisville or simple wreaths on the street lights, local traditions help set the stage for the Christmas season.

Daylight, Indiana is the place of my most vivid Christmas memories – home for all my childhood, with many elements I associate with Christmas. The town consisted of a general store, a grain elevator, a gas station, a barber shop, and a handful of houses.

Jake, the owner and sole employee of the little store situated precariously near the railroad track, kept his shelves crowded with seed potatoes, work boots, spools of thread, and can goods. From the cold case in the back, bologna was sliced to order, wrapped in brown paper, and tied with string. Nails and chicken wire were in the basement; ladders on the back porch. The inventory seldom changed except in December when the big jar of orange slice candy appeared on the front counter. A quarter bought a bag of slices, plus Jake's gift of a free peppermint stick "to cut the sugar"!

When Jake died I remember being surprised to learn he was Jewish. All those years he had quietly lived his faith in a predominantly Catholic community; a kind man who helped make Christmas special for the children of Daylight.

Across from Jake's store was Young's Grain Elevator, the tallest establishment in town. As the gathering place for local farmers, the cinder block office smelled of cigar smoke and conversation. One particular November day the talk was of the fire which had destroyed the shed containing the town's holiday decorations. There were no replacement funds available, so the town would be unadorned for the season.

Considering the situation, my dad, a true jack of all trades, secretly set to work. As a master welder and electrician, he pieced together a large Christmas tree using scrap metal and pipes, and then wired it with big colorful bulbs. Under cover of darkness he hoisted it to the top of the tallest silo at the grain elevator where, once illuminated, it could be seen across the entire area. News of the mystery tree spread like wildfire throughout the community, but my dad never said a word.

Although the elevator closed many years ago and the silos are long deserted, if you look closely, you can still see the rusted skeleton of the infamous tree which came to be a favorite sight and tradition of Christmas in Daylight.

## Mrs. Blake's Cookies

Cinda King

The wooden record board at the front of the auditorium registered approximately 100 in attendance on a typical Sunday morning at the Elberfeld First Baptist Church. We began attending there when I was four years old, so most of my early church memories are centered within those walls and with the members of that congregation.

Although we did not celebrate Advent or ceremoniously hang the Greens (leaving that to other community churches), the weeks leading up to Christmas were filled with activities and great anticipation of the season.

After Thanksgiving, my mother, the self-appointed, but much appreciated flower arranger of the church, had the wreaths on the doors, the porch columns wrapped with garland, and fat red candles in the auditorium windows. Decorated boxes were placed in the vestibule to collect non-perishables for the Christmas Eve food baskets, and the "secret" phone tree was initiated soliciting funds for the pastor's gift. Thus, the season officially began.

One of my favorite activities each year was the annual Caroling Hayride. Song sheets and flashlights were passed as singers of all ages snuggled in the straw to stay warm. The tractor and wagon slowly made its way along a route carefully mapped out to include the houses of all homebound members, townfolk who specifically requested a visit, and even a few local curmudgeons who were deemed in need of a little holiday cheer.

One of the highly anticipated stops was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Blake, founding members of the church. They were younger than God but older than any other people I had ever known (or so it seemed at the time). Their modest home, just a few doors down from the church, always was strategically placed at the end of the route. As the wagon came to a halt, straw covered singers gathered round the front porch; and with the first notes of *Deck the Halls* Mr. and Mrs. Blake appeared, smiling from ear to ear, and bearing trays of homemade cookies and hot chocolate.

On those cold December nights so many years ago, Mr. and Mrs. Blake's generous and tasty offerings certainly warmed our bodies, but now I recognize those moments as a timeless and special gift exchange between a lovely, aging couple and the members of the congregation they cherished through all their years.

To this day, when I hear carolers, I remember the Blakes and imagine the sweet aroma wafting through Heaven as the angel choirs enjoy trays of yummy homemade cookies.

## *Falling Angels*

Cinda King

“I’m the first one on the program; it’s the most important part” are the only words I remember from the Christmas poem I recited as a three year old standing at the front of the Forest Hills Baptist Church. Laughter ensued as I hiked up my white angel costume and scratched my upper thigh throughout . . . but I did not miss a word. We moved our membership to Elberfeld First Baptist shortly thereafter but I was assured it was not because of my risqué recitation.

The small churches I attended as a child did not have the resources to present elaborate productions, but the Christmas program was still the highlight of the season. “Pieces” were assigned to the children, with special attention given to the nativity re-enactors. My mother, knee deep in every endeavor, would not cast her own children in the much coveted roles of Mary and Joseph but relegated us to the supporting roles of shepherds, kings, and angels. I didn’t mind since it was the one time each year my name and “angel” would be used in the same sentence.

The year my brother (who incidentally was never cast as an angel) played the role of King Balthazar, was one of the more memorable pageants ever presented at Elberfeld First Baptist. In timely and perfect order, the choir processed to the loft, the narrator moved to the podium, and the costumed actors awaited their cues; all except King Balthazar who had misplaced his crown. After a frantic search, Ms. Polly, the pastor’s wife, decided she had time to retrieve another crown before the grand entrance of the kings.

The attic, above the auditorium, was unfinished with boards placed across the beams offering storage for seasonal items. While the choir sang, Ms. Polly climbed the pull-down ladder and stealthily stepped from beam to beam, freezing in place as the song ended and Mary and Joseph arrived at the stable. As the choir began again, announcing Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, Ms. Polly continued on her quest, but lost her footing and came crashing through the ceiling right above the heads of the little band of angels. Luckily she was able to catch herself before falling completely through but the audience witnessed a *wondrous sight* as her body and legs came down but her dress stayed up.

Choir members and actors, covered with ceiling debris and dust, gathered with the audience outside the church as Ms. Polly was taken away in the ambulance; and, as it drove out of sight, the entire throng heard King Balthazar (my brother who was never cast as an angel) declare “Well, at least she was wearing white!”

\* Names have been changed to protect the innocent - except for my brother who was never innocent.

## *Christmas Tree Memories*

Cinda King

There is no debate at our house - we are a “real” Christmas tree family. We have purchased our tree from the same vendor every year of our marriage and have yet to be disappointed with the selection offered or the familiarity of the exchange. Several years ago, when the Louisville Hay Market closed, we wondered whether Gary would still set up downtown but were relieved to see his red plaid flannel cap as we approached the tree stands along Witherspoon.

As a child, growing up in the country, we did not purchase our trees but scouted the woods and fence rows around the farm for the perfect tree. Cedar was in abundance so that is what usually made its way into our home – filling the house with its wonderful fragrance.

While my dad nailed the tree to the stand and doubled checked for hitch-hiking critters, my mom, sister, brother, and I prepared the ornaments. The kitchen table was littered with Elmer’s Glue, tape, glitter, pipe cleaners, and stickers. We made paper chains, stars from pot pie tins, and popsicle stick reindeer. Wishbones, the ones we had not snapped at dinner-time challenges, were glued together and glittered to make stars. Our fingers were pricked as we strung popcorn and cranberries on lengths of thread. And the finishing touch – static filled tinsel and a tin pie pan topper with a center hole for one big colored bulb.

I remember comparing our trees to those I saw in the homes of friends and relatives. My grandparent’s shiny aluminum tree with the color wheel, a neighbor’s tall tree with blue lights and white ornaments, and a friend’s candy covered white tree were the most fabulous sights I had ever seen, especially in comparison to our homemade decorations and scraggly fence row cedar. So many years away from those comparisons, what I wouldn’t give to sit at the kitchen table with my mother, sister, and brother making paper chains and wishbone stars just one more time.

The trees we have in our home now are always deemed “the prettiest ever” and each is covered with lovely ornaments – some homemade, some store bought – but each filled with significance and sentimental value. It is still a family affair to choose and decorate our tree, but I know the day is coming, sooner than I might hope, when my kids will be decorating trees of their own in their own homes. They might choose a real tree or go artificial, use multi-colored lights or clear, and they might even buy all their ornaments, but the hope in my heart is that they will remember the trees of their childhood as I remember mine ... a precious memory filled with love, togetherness, true Christmas spirit and lots and lots of glitter.

## *Joy to the World*

Cinda King

My maternal grandparents' home was a haven of happy memories for me. Gammie's Girls Week each summer, Granddad's strawberry patch, adventures in the monkey tree (a big apple tree with great limbs for climbing), and elaborate plays produced for my grandparents' enjoyment/endurance all make the top ten; but number one on the list is definitely the Christmas days I spent in their home.

Most years it was wall-to-wall relatives: aunts and uncles, cousins (and eventually their spouses and kids), great-aunts and great-uncles, foster children, assorted friends, and of course, Gammie and Granddad. Typical of most families, it was a colorful cast of characters. Uncle Bob blinded us with the lights from his home movie camera. Aunt Docia, plagued with hot flashes, performed a slow strip-tease during the course of the dinner preparations. Uncles David and Billy disappeared behind the garage and out of sight of little eyes for discrete smoke breaks. Aunt Doris cried when she laughed. Great-Uncle Clyde pulled pranks and Great-Aunt Flossie delighted with her quick wit and occasional off-color remark.

The men watched football and shared fishing tales (some truer than others) while the women cooked and caught up on the latest "need to know" information. Boredom was not on the agenda for the kids as the ping-pong tournament commenced, favorite toys were shared, and creativity was encouraged by the "dress-up" closet in the upstairs bedroom. Lively conversation and activity filled every corner.

The aroma greeting us as we arrived early in the day intensified as the morning and meal preparations progressed. Turkey, goose, baked ham, dressing, macaroni and cheese, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, mashed potatoes with giblet gravy, green beans, corn, buttered peas, parsnips, pickled beets, bread and butter pickles, cranberry sauce straight from the can, fried apples, yeast rolls, pies, cakes and cookies covered every surface in the kitchen. Great cooks abounded in the family, but my Gammie was the best and promised to provide each grandchild's favorite food.

When the announcement finally was made that it was time to eat, the family tree morphed into a serpentine chain winding from room to room as we held hands for the blessing. Without need of accompaniment, *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*, in lovely four part harmony, filled the house before Granddad's humble prayer of thanksgiving.

Years have passed since the last Christmas in my grandparents' home – time rolls on, family dynamics change, and new traditions are necessarily established – yet I always will know in my heart the privilege of knowing and being with those folks for so many Christmas days was truly a gift and a "*wonder of God's love*".