



TAR HEEL MEMORIES

A Full House

Having a hand in the preparations added to a little girl's excitement for the annual holiday gathering at her Scotland County home.

BY ELLEN PITTMAN WATTS



I grew up in the '50s in my mother's family home, lovingly referred to as the "Big House." This home in Laurel Hill, where I lived with my grandmother, mother, father, and two older sisters, was built at the turn-of-the-past-century by my great-grandfather. It was a large, white house with round columns from which wisteria vines hung in the summer. The wraparound porch had a wicker porch swing on one end and rocking chairs all around. The tin-roofed house had three stories, and all of the upstairs windows had gables. The second floor even had a balcony. We weren't rich, but as Mama often said, "We have plenty of food to eat, and that's more than some have."

At Christmastime, this home became the gathering place for my mother's family, the Monroe clan, and the entire community. We began preparing weeks in advance. I'd go walking in the woods during my Thanksgiving break from school, looking for the perfect Christmas tree. When I found the best cedar tree growing in the woods, I'd return home and tell Daddy so he could chop it down and help me drag it home. This tree had to be about seven or eight feet tall and perfectly rounded, with no visible flaws.

Once it was cut down and brought to the Big House, it would be placed in a bucket filled with coal to keep it upright. The tree was placed in the corner of the living room across from the front door. Like all the others in the house, the living room had a 10- or 12-foot ceiling, so the height of the tree was important.

Decorating the tree was my contribution to the preparations. Our tree decorations were lights — some of them bubble lights — plus glass balls in every color, gold garland, little figurines collected over the years, and lots of silver tinsel to cover the tree from top to

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bottom. We had a lighted star that was always placed on top, and at night, the lights sent dancing shadows on the furniture and walls. As Christmas drew nearer, I often sat in this room listening to carols on the record player, sometimes singing along and watching myself in the big, gold-framed mirror over the couch, pretending I was on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

The day finally arrives

On Christmas Eve, my grandmother's sisters, Aunt Grace from Sanford and Aunt Marie from Gastonia, came to stay with us. Along with their husbands, they brought their children and sometimes even their grandchildren. We had plenty of room for everyone because the Big House had two bedrooms downstairs and four bedrooms upstairs. Our biggest problem, however, was keeping everyone warm at night, since the only heat in the house in those days was from the fireplaces in each room. Keeping coal or wood supplied to each fireplace was no small task.

Christmas Day usually started very early, with everyone gathered in the big, sunny kitchen at the back of the house, where the coal-burning stove kept us all warm. Mama would prepare breakfast at one end of the kitchen while Grandmama worked on the gas stove at the other end of the kitchen, preparing something for the evening dinner. We all ate in shifts, according to when we woke up, taking turns to crowd around the kitchen table. After breakfast, Grandmama sent us all out of the kitchen and told us to stay out of the way. My parents, sisters, and I always took this time to go see what Santa Claus had brought, and what treasures were hidden in our stockings, which were hung over the

fireplace in the living room.

Later, I'd go into the dining room and take in the festive scene there. In the center of the room, a huge table, covered with my great-grandmother's lace tablecloth, held jars of my grandmother's watermelon rind pickles, spiced grapes, and pickled peaches ready to be put in glass dishes. A buffet, also covered in white lace, bore my great aunts' pecan pies and mincemeat pies, my grandmother's white fruitcake, and my mother's fruitcake.

Daddy had a fire going in the dining room's fireplace, and the light reflected off of the crystal arranged in shelves all around the room. The china was on the table, and the silver, which my sisters, grandmother, and I had already polished, sat in neat, gleaming rows. My job that day was to get the candy dishes out of the built-in cabinet next to the fireplace and fill them with either heart-shaped Red Hots candies or Grandmama's homemade mints and then place the dishes on tables in the living room, parlor, and hall. (Grandmama gave everybody she cared anything about a tin of her sweet mints.)

Gathering together


Throughout the day, various neighbors, great-aunts, great-uncles, cousins, friends, and church family stopped by to see each other. My father spent the day carrying in wood to build fires in all the fireplaces and stoves to keep everyone warm, and Mama spent the day cooking and preparing food for that night. It wasn't unusual for 50 to 100 people to eat at our house on Christmas night, so it took a lot of work to get everything ready.

As soon as it began to get dark,

people began arriving for the meal. Every family brought something to add to the feast. Many prepared vegetables that they'd canned or frozen from their gardens the summer before. Some brought breads, pies, or casseroles. Aunt Grace always made oyster dressing, which all the men loved and all the children avoided like the plague.

Soon the dining room table was covered with food, including a huge turkey and a very large ham. Someone would ask the minister from Laurel Hill Presbyterian Church to bless the food, and a line would quickly form around the table. People streamed in for hours and got plates of food, which they'd carry to the kitchen, living room, hall, parlor, porch, or stairs to eat — anywhere they could find an empty spot. We children usually sat on the stairs in the center of the house so that we could see everyone.

One of my great-uncles, Uncle Johnny, always asked the children to get together and form a line in the hall and do the Hokey Pokey. Our reward was a dime from his pocket and the hysterical fits of laughter from our parents, cousins, and older siblings. This exercise was soon followed by the children going outside, where Daddy gave each of us a sparkler to burn. Now it was our turn to have fits of laughter and excited squeals of joy.

All too soon, the evening was over, and everyone started leaving for home to put the little ones to bed and to rest from the excitement of the day. 

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