

A NOTE FROM BECKY

Wayne and I were raised by strong Christian families. Our families were dedicated to the Lord and to the church. Christmas always reflected the depth of this commitment to God, our Father, and Jesus, the newborn Son.

In this issue, we welcome you to the Combee Family Christmas, of years past. Although Pop-Pop and Granny Combee are safely in their eternal home, the celebration of our Lord's birth continues now in many homes.

Welcome to the Combee Family Christmas!

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Suzanne D. Williams

**I wrote this story in 2009. One afternoon in 2010, I read this story to my grandmother, who is featured in it. She passed away later that year, and that time with her is now one of my most precious memories.*

We pile in the car. I turn my head and gaze upward into the night sky. Unconsciously I pull my favorite blue sweater tight around me. My mother pats me on the shoulder, her touch encouraging me to stop my stargazing and pay attention to the task at hand.

Daddy has his head in the trunk where I can hear the Christmas packages landing with a thump and a brief rustle of paper.

Half the fun of Christmas, I think to myself, is that it goes on and on. Tonight is Christmas Eve, and like so many other Christmas Eves, we head down the long drive to visit my dad's parents, my grandparents. Tonight the festivities begin. Tomorrow morning, my brother and I will open the gifts my parents have bought us, and tomorrow night, there will be fun with my other grandparents and the rest of my mom's family.

Now seated, I turn my head again and press my face to the window glass, allowing my gaze to cross the overgrown farm fields. The cold glass chills my forehead. With my active seven-year-old mind, for a moment I picture the field as it is in the summertime. I see it covered in long rows of

healthy fruits and vegetables, and I picture my grandfather there, plowing the soil on his rusty red tractor, or walking about watering and fertilizing the rows. I smile at thought of the familiar scene.

My reverie is interrupted by the car engine's roar, and the wheels begin to turn. They crunch across the packed dirt of the driveway on the short trek to Pop-Pop and Granny's house.

Our house sits on one end of the winding dirt road. To one side is the field and on the other stands a thick copse of live oaks, which we call "the woods." Pop-Pop and Granny live at the opposite end of the driveway in a small wood-frame house set in the midst of a grove of citrus trees.

Their house is crowded with relatives when we arrive. The youngest of a crowd of cousins, my brother and I slip in the door, letting it slam behind us. Compared to the darkness of the night, the house is bright and cheerful. I smile as the familiar faces begin the wave of expected greetings.

"My how you've grown!" my aunt says.

"What grade are you in?" my uncle asks. "How's school?"

Gazing around the room, every square inch of space is filled. The dining table and chairs dominate the small room. The walls are covered with shelves, heavy with Granny's knickknacks, as well as placards and family photographs.

My mom enters, carrying a casserole she prepared earlier today. My dad comes in behind her, his arms full of colorfully wrapped gifts. The wave of greetings begins again, and the room fills with happy chatter.

Christmas Eves are always like this, and it is

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the best thing in my life. In my young thinking, every family everywhere does something similar. They gather during the holidays, swap stories, give gifts, and, of course, eat too much food.

My stomach grumbles, and I look toward the serving table. It is laden with dishes.

There is baked ham, chicken and dumplings, and macaroni and cheese. There are bowls of Pop-Pop's homegrown vegetables: green beans, collard greens, and black-eyed peas. There is the ever-present plate of sliced tomatoes.

Another table holds a multitude of desserts: cookies, brownies, and coconut cake. I am especially fond of Granny's pound cake, all slathered in sliced sugared strawberries and whipped cream.

As if on cue, my grandfather enters from the living room, just beyond. In his booming voice, he declares it's time to eat and lumbers over to his favorite chair. The room falls quiet as he prays, thanking God for family, for togetherness, and for the health of everyone in the past year. Afterward, everyone rushes over, fills their plates, and drifts off to find a seat.

When the meal ends, everyone seems content to smile and digest the feast. Looking straight ahead, I admire Granny with her fluffy white hair and flowery printed dress. She looks so pretty, and Pop-Pop is distinguished in his plaid flannel shirt and black trousers. Last-minute bits of conversation float across the house atop laughter and joy.

Pop-Pop rises from the table, and the atmosphere changes. Everyone follows him into the living room. This is the signal for the time of gift giving. The floor of the house shakes with the many feet. The tiny living room becomes even smaller with the crowd of people filling it.

Being young, it is easy for me to slip in and find a square to sit on the floor. While everyone settles around me, I gaze at the Christmas tree with its shiny lights and wonder which package beneath it is mine. I don't expect anything grand. After all, Granny and Pop-Pop have so many people to buy for. But every child looks forward to whatever is hidden beneath all those ribbons and bows.

My anticipation must wait a little longer though, because Pop-Pop reaches for his Bible. He sinks deep into his brown leather armchair and clears his throat. "It's time for Christmas story," he says, and a deep silence descends in the room. Elbow-to-elbow we listen as he reads the familiar words from the book of Luke.

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed ..."

I stop here and fast forward, from the age of seven, to twelve, fifteen, and twenty-three. This Christmas Eve scene repeated itself many times over the years. Oh, the people in it grew older. My cousins married and had children, and their children married and had children. But always, the little house and the hearts of the family managed to fit everyone in. Each person was sure to receive a gift, no matter how small it was, and everyone came, glad to see everyone else.

For me, Pop-Pop's telling of the Christmas story was pivotal to the entire evening. I enjoyed opening the presents, and I loved the food. But none of it mattered until the story had been told.

The scene changed forever when my grandfather died. He was the first grandparent in my life to pass away. We cried for him and yet rejoiced, knowing his place was in heaven, knowing he was happy, and healthy and free. That Christmas, the family gathered again at the little house. There was time to eat and share, to laugh at the antics of the children, to catch up on all the family news. But when the moment came, and everyone gathered in the living room, I stood there with tears in my eyes.

The room was still the same. The old piano still sat in the corner covered in photos and Christmas cards. The huge wooden casement TV still took up the center. Even the couch and coffee table remained the same. And it was as crowded as it'd ever been. The kids sat on the floor, as they always had, and I, now an adult, stood, instead, in the doorway.

But this year Pop-Pop's brown leather chair was empty. I couldn't help but think that none of the children would know the story.

Then someone, just who I can't recall, reached over and picked up his old Bible, and one of the children opened it and began to read. There before me were new faces and old ones, familiar people, and a story I had heard all my life. But that year, though the voice was different, what I heard was Pop-Pop reading, just like he always had.

I miss my grandfather. In my head I see him working the fields. When I come across antique tractors, like his 1952 Allis Chalmers, I think of him. No vegetables anywhere are ever as good as his were. Yet at Christmas time, when I miss him the most, I can always hear his voice reading the Christmas story. And it never fails to transport me to a place where I know what it all means, where there is love and joy, and where things make sense.

For me, the Christmas story is truly the greatest story ever told.

Merry Christmas