Christmas on the Farm

By Geneva Yerbey

Every year when Christmas draws near, I can't help but be thankful for the opportunity I have to go out and buy a live tree or sometimes cut my own at a tree farm.

I remember when I was 6 years old, we moved from the red hills of North Alabama, where the cedar and pine trees grew abundantly, to the black dirt in the flat delta country of Arkansas, where there are no cedars or pine, but mostly pecan and tall cypress trees.

This was in the early 1940s, and jobs were scarce and times were hard for a man with a large family to feed. So we moved 200 miles to a strange land where all you could see for miles was row upon row of tall, white cotton.

We moved into a small shotgun house on a large farm known as the Rainey Farm. Mr. Rainey owned hundreds of acres of cotton and he needed all the help he could get to pick it. There were eight of us kids, and that was the reason we were there. The cotton grew much taller there than it did in Alabama.

Some of the other workers laughed and made fun of us. They said they didn't blame us for leaving the red hills, where the cotton only grew as tall as a bumblebee. But we didn't care what they said, for we knew that we would be going back home as soon as the cotton was all picked.

Daddy said I was big enough to pick then, so Mamma made me a pick sack out of a flour sack by sewing a string onto it. I wore it around my neck and picked as far up on the tall stalk as I could reach. My brother picked the rest.

Mr. Rainey was a really nice man to work for. Every Friday when he came to pay off the workers, he brought all the young children a special frozen treat from the store. It was called a Cho Cho Bar, and we had never tasted anything so good. We really looked forward to Fridays.

Before long, the cotton crop was finished. But we didn't have enough money saved to go home to Alabama. We would have to stay all winter in Arkansas.

Soon fall turned to winter. Christmas was not far off, but we did not have any money to buy a tree. Back home in Alabama, we had always been able to cut our own big cedar from the thicket behind our house. Here in Arkansas, Christmas trees were cut in the hills and hauled into town, where they were sold for a dollar apiece. Mama said we did not have a dollar to spare for a tree, but she assured us that Santa would stop anyway. Still, we were afraid that he wouldn't.

Left to right are my brother, Harold South; my baby sister, Barbara South; sister Shirley South; a cousin, Bonnie Coats; me; and Shirley's twin, Shelby South. This photo was taken in 1946.

When Mama got the big, red crepe paper bell out of the trunk and hung it from the ceiling, we knew that Christmas was just a few days away. This would be the first Christmas we had ever had without a tree. It just didn't seem right. It had always

been my older brother's job to go find a nice, big cedar and put it up for us, but there were none growing for miles around.

After breakfast the next morning, my brother got the hatchet and said he was going to get us a Christmas tree. Mama told him it was too far to walk to the hills. But he said he wouldn't have to go that far, and out the door he went.

Before long, he came back, and he was dragging the biggest, tallest dead cotton stalk he could find. He stuck the stalk in a lard bucket and filled it with black mud. We knew that when that mud dried, it would be as hard as concrete, and the stalk would stand straight and tall. We started making paper chains from strips of paper glued together with flour and water. Mama found some tinfoil icicles in the trunk and we hung them all over the cotton stalk. We stuck small wads of cotton on the limbs to look like snow. When we finished, we had a beautiful Christmas tree.

Even though we missed the wonderful smell of fresh-cut cedar all through the house, we were mighty proud of our tree. And on Christmas morning, we saw that our stockings hanging beside it were stuffed with an orange, an apple and English walnuts.

We moved back to Alabama the following year. When Christmas came around again, we were excited to once more be able to go with my brother out into the woods behind our house and cut a big cedar for our Christmas tree.

Even though that happened a long time ago, I always think of Christmas on the Rainey Farm and the cotton-stalk Christmas tree. And when Christmas rolls around this year, maybe I'll make some paper chains just to remind myself about how blessed I really am.

Recently, my brother and I made a special trip back to see what the farm looked like. We found the exact spot where our little shotgun house once had stood. It's now in a large soybean field—but the place where our house stood is bare, and nothing grows there. I wonder why? All that's left are a little girl's memories. ❖

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