A Sharecropper Christmas

By Carlene Poff Baker

Hearing the wind howling at the windows, we girls huddled closer to the wood-crackling stove in our sharecropper shanty in Half Moon Community (or Route 3, Blytheville, Ark.). It was in the early 1940s. We marveled as we watched the spatting snow designing the windowpanes. It seemed to be etching a message.

The lacy motifs on the windows and scattered sprigs of holly berries Daddy had found along the fencerows were the sum total of the drafty front room's holiday decorations.

I could hear Mama in the kitchen humming some song—maybe it was *Silent Night*—as she perfumed the spacious kitchen with aromas of chocolate, pineapple, pecans, allspice and ham.

Daddy was constantly going out and in the front door, laying in wood, taking out ashes, and going to the barn to see that the two mules and the cow had sufficient shelter from the intense cold. Daddy's rafter-shaking tromping on the front porch was the signal for one of us to turn the latch, move the chink-rag, and open the door for him.

Each time Daddy went out, he had to make new tracks in the snow, because the old ones had been covered with drifts. As I watched the barn change from drab gray to pristine white, I knew that the shanty was being whitened as well, and I wondered anxiously how Santa would be able to find us.

I wondered, too, if the roof was sturdy enough for Santa, because I overheard Daddy say that some of the shingles had blown off. Of course, if somebody just happened to leave the front door unlatched and moved the chink-rag away … .

As Christmas Eve neared, we four sisters ransacked our sock bins to find the longest stockings with the fewest holes. Daddy hammered long nails behind the stove on which to hang them. At dusk on Christmas Eve, we donned our flannels, climbed into our beds and snuggled under a mountain of quilts, our feet touching the wrapped "heating irons" that had been soaking up heat all day on the stove.

My ears were tuned to listening for unusual rustlings in the snow or strange steps on the porch.

With my head under the covers, my thoughts turned to the One whose birthday it was. I wondered if the stable in which Jesus had been born was anything like our cold barn, and if the hay had been warm enough. I knew right well that if His parents had come to our shanty, we would have welcomed Him. I would have gladly turned the latch, unchinked the door, swung it open, and let them warm themselves behind our stove.

Suddenly I heard something! Was it on the rooftop … or on the porch …? No, it was beside my bed! Sister Bonnie was shaking me and shouting, "Get up, get up! Come see what Santa has brought us!"

"Oh! He found our house after all!" I exclaimed.

We girls scampered to the front room. Our eyes grew big at the sight of pretty bonneted dolls with open-and-shut eyes, and tin tea sets. My bright-eyed sister Mavis claimed the red rocking chair. We found crayons and coloring books and paper-doll books and … something on my finger?

Peering at it more closely in the flickering light of the draft door of the stove, I saw that it was the ring with a tiny blue set, just like the one I had secretly longed for in the Sears catalog! And how had Santa found my finger under the heavy quilts and put it on me without waking me?

"Lookee!" youngest sister Patricia squealed, pointing to our stockings. They were delightfully deformed, bulging with lumps. Each of us scrambled for her own. I removed the bulges one by one with delectable joy: a shiny red apple, a juicy orange, some English walnuts in the shell, peppermint sticks, and a banana without a single black spot on the peeling.

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My most difficult decision about the stocking goodies was which to eat first and which would last longest without spoiling. Except for a random rolling-store truck visit in summer, Christmas was the only time we were afforded fruit. When it was time to eat the apple, I would bite into the skin and sample the juice for a day or two before actually eating it, making the apple last as long as I could.

Above our cheers, I heard Mama humming again as she cooked breakfast. It was the shortest time we girls ever sat around the table all year because our new possessions beckoned and dispelled appetites.

By the time Mama had prepared dinner, however, about midafternoon, we were ready to spend a longer time at the table. It seemed top-heavy with the enormous feast. We had to get reacquainted with recipes we had not tasted since last Christmas, such as stuffing, eggnog and mincemeat.

We indulged in delightful play all afternoon, interrupted occasionally by stompings on the porch announcing visitors. Neighbors came by to extend greetings. Seeing Daddy and Mama shaking hands with them and talking happily around the stove made me feel wonderfully warm inside.

Angels were a popular subject during the Christmas season, and I had heard that we ought to entertain a stranger because he might be an angel in disguise. I expected such a stranger to show up at our shanty. Sure enough, old grizzle-faced Arch Willis came rapping at our back door, asking Mama if she had "some scraps of food too good to be thrown out to the chickens." Of course Mama invited him in and set him down to the feast at which we had just stuffed ourselves. She had plenty left.

We girls watched Arch devour the food ravenously. We wanted to see if wings would pop out just about where his galluses fit across his bony shoulders. I sighed with disappointment when he buttoned the last button on his odious outer coat and toothlessly grinned his gratitude to Mama. I reckoned he wasn't an angel at all, just a lonesome old man at Christmas.

Daddy shook some Prince Albert tobacco onto an OCB cigarette paper, rolled it and lit it, and handed it to Arch as he went out the door.

Among the other annual callers were some of the men from the church who drove a wagon over the snowbanked roads to collect gifts for the poor in the community. Mama obliged.

I never understood the logic of Mama giving them the newest and brightest quilt instead of one of the faded ones on my bed, and I couldn't figure out why she gave away jars of good, sweet blackberries and muscadine jelly rather than bad-tasting beets or yucky okra. But seeing the radiance on Mama's face when she handed these best things to the men made me feel all warm inside again.

We weren't finished when darkness hovered. When it was as dark outside as it could get, Daddy told us to put on our heavy clothes for some outdoor fun. He brought out fireworks left over from Fourth of July and hosted a marvelous lighting up of the night. When the last sparkler had fizzled out, we went back inside to wind down the day.

The wind wailed at the windows, pushing frigid air into the room and chilling us to the marrow even through our flannels. We huddled around the wood-crackling stove, turning from one side to the other, basking and thawing.

Although my toes and fingers were numb, a glad warmth stayed inside me. Glancing at the window, I saw that the snow had completed its etching on the pane. It seemed to say in silent whiteness, "Peace on Earth." I sighed, figuring that maybe that was the reason for the wonderful warm feeling inside me. ❖

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