

An Old-Fashioned Christmas

By Donna Laubach

It started with the usual trip to Grandmother's house. And that meant a long, winding, snow covered and often drifted Mt. Pleasant Township road trip from Bloomsburg to the countryside where my grandparents lived. That was the beginning of a day that I knew would culminate in a great Christmas dinner, some sharing of presents and, of course, getting to see some relatives that I hadn't seen for a long time. It was Christmas circa early sixties.

Now, that might not seem old-fashioned to you depending on your perspective, but it takes me back about thirty-some years. This was the Alfred and Fannie Ikeler family Christmas and it included (at least at that time) Aunt Zoe and Uncle Jeb, Uncle Bobby and Aunt Helen, Uncle Donald and Aunt Jean, Aunt Bonnie, Aunt Donna and Uncle Bill, Uncle Larry and Aunt Lucy, my parents Betty and Bill, great-grandmother Minnie, occasionally Great Aunt Helen and cousin Marianna, and the children: Doug (my brother), Angie, Phyllis Jean, Pam and Roxanne (the babies) (sorry Heather, Little Donnie, Amy and Lane – you weren't born yet), and me, Bud. Whew, how many is that? Over twenty, I guess.

We'd all arrive at the Ikeler homestead sometime before noon on Christmas Day. It was usually chaotic for a while as everyone said their hellos and greetings and had a chance to put their covered dishes somewhere. And that was usually on the coal stove or on the big long countertop that ran from one end of the kitchen to the other, or on the big country kitchen table that was going to seat most all of us. Man, oh man, there were all kinds of goodies and the smells, the smells were enough to make your mouth water: roasted turkey, corn that had been dry roasted, mashed potatoes and gravy, scalloped oysters, all kinds of other vegetables, homemade bread, pumpkin pies and, of course, cranberries.

But, us kids couldn't even have a little nibble until we all sat down and said grace and I remember that being torturous. However, my sweet Grandmother would always see our temporary dilemma and give us a spatula or spoon or some other cooking utensil to lick off. She was a very perceptive lady and a very talented one, too. There wasn't too much around the farm kitchen that she couldn't do. Most everything was made from scratch. This included the breads, the pies and even the butter. I can even remember seeing my grandmother go down to the chicken coop and grab a bird by the legs, take it up behind the house, put it in some kind of big funnel where just the head would be sticking out, and with a big old butcher knife, she would lop off its head. You'd see that chicken all dressed and ready for cooking in no time flat. She made all kinds of clothes from scratch, too. The only store-bought items she really needed were the basic ingredients for things. In today's disposable, throw-away society, I often think my grandmother would be the perfect teacher to be put in charge of recycling. There wasn't too much that went to waste around her farm. Even the scraps from the table were thrown to the pigs that'd have them eaten up just as fast as you could throw 'em into the pigpen.

My Grandfather loved Christmas. It never dawned on us then but my Grandfather came from a different era. One in which people had big families. And everyone stayed close to home and worked the farm. My memories of Christmas family gatherings must be nothing compared to what he could have conjured up. Just think about it. He had how many children? And how many brothers and sisters did he have? And how many children did they have? Of course I don't have the answers to these questions; only my Aunt Zoe or Great Aunt Helen or my Mother would know that stuff. And that reminds me of how they could keep all the genealogy of the family in their heads. They could tell you how someone was related to someone else without even batting an eye. "Oh, yes, he is our cousin twice removed from our Grandmother Crawford's side of the house" they'd say "who is married to so-and-so and whose mother was an Elder and whose..." and they could go on and on. I would usually listen for a minute but quickly lose interest and then run off somewhere.

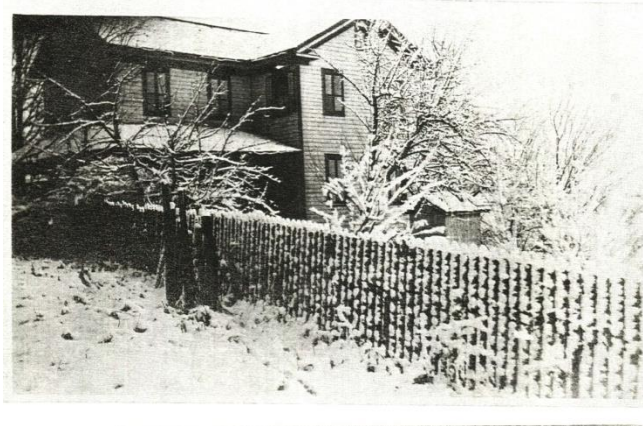
But anyway, my Grandfather truly loved Christmas because I often heard him say so. I know now that it was the chance to see everyone all together again that made it so special for him. Because in the post-World War II era, people started to scatter more, and he saw it in his family, too: first Bobby, then Bonnie, and later Donald and Larry. Bobby moved to Illinois and later to Kentucky, Bonnie to New York City, Donald and Jean to Arizona, and Larry and Lucy to Maryland.

I used to love to shoot the old 22. One Christmas, Uncle Bobby and I went out to the barn and we started shooting pigeons. Right inside the barn. It never occurred to me that maybe we'd be shooting holes in the roof, too. Man, we were having fun. We'd take turns shooting and we dropped a few. Uncle Bobby was a pretty good shot. He was in World War II. I always wanted to know what it was like and I asked him several times. But, he never really told me. I think he didn't like to talk about it very much. Anyway, we sure had a great time out there in that barn. I showed him all the great tunnels Uncle Larry had built into the hay loft. These were very intricate tunnels with hideaway places and larger openings where you could camp out for the night with a bunch of friends and eat popcorn and tell ghost stories. My Uncle Larry had a great sense of organization and could plan out anything.

We finished shooting and started back for the house because it was getting cold. Boy, would it get cold up there. You could see your breath and when you breathed in from your nose, the inside of your nose would freeze. We made it back to the house and I was really charged up. I said, "Uncle Bobby and I were shooting pigeons in the barn." "In the barn?" my grandfather asked. "Yes, right in the barn," I said. "We dropped a mess of 'em." My uncle gave me a dirty look and then he got one back from my Grandfather. But it didn't last long because it was Christmas and my Grandfather was in a wonderful mood.

Boy, that old farmhouse sure would smell good right before dinnertime. I'd have to distract myself until we got called, so I'd look out the window and usually see a huge snow drift right in front of the house. The wind would really blow at night up there and cause these big drifts that

sometimes the State snow plows couldn't even push through. Down below the house was a big pasture where the cattle would graze in the summertime, but in the winter would be transformed into a scene from Dr. Zhivago—you know, the ice castle part.



We'd finally sit down to dinner and after someone said grace, we dug in. Man, oh man, what a feast it was. I usually took too much and was therefore later forced to clean my plate. Which sometimes was nearly impossible to do. At first, I think I remember it being very quiet as everyone started eating because the Ikelers really loved their food. But in a short period of time, there was so much talking that a kid my age couldn't even hear himself think. The Ikelers loved parties, too, and Christmas was the best!

After dinner, we'd go into the parlor to open presents. But soon afterwards, one by one, people would drift off to a bedroom for a nice winter afternoon nap I would usually play checkers or play with a Christmas present and talk to a relative that would still be awake. "How are you doing old sport?" my Uncle Jeb would ask. He always added a certain class to the affair. I'm not sure what we talked about but I always enjoyed listening to my Uncle Jeb talk. He always threw a lot of "old sports" and "old mans" into his lingo. He reminded me of an English gentleman although I never really knew his background.

I think I would always talk my brother into going outside to play in the snow no matter how cold it was and always over the objections of my mother and Grandmother. We always seemed to head up the hill across the road from the house to do some sleigh riding. You could really get going on that hill if the snow was packed and wasn't too deep. If the snow was too deep, we'd build a snow fort and have a good time until we started freezing and our hands and feet got so cold we couldn't feel them anymore and have to start for the house.

I remember looking at the old farmhouse from up on that hill. It was L-shaped with a built-on garage to the left which entered into the kitchen from the side. In front, there was the main floor with large windows on either side and a chimney which popped out of the roof to support the coal stove.

To the right was a large two story section which formed the other part of the L shape. This section had a grand porch that wrapped around it on three sides, complete with roof and pretty decorative posts. The porch provided plenty of shade in the summertime and a place to sit on a rocking chair with your eyes closed and contemplate the clover that grew down below the hill. But the clover was still many months away and what was visible was a beautiful winter wonderland. It was just an old farmhouse, with a barn and a shed sitting in a little valley, shrouded in snow and so very insulated from the fast-paced silicon world of today.

As I mentioned, my brother and I were about to freeze to death so we ran to the house where we knew it would be toasty warm and we could sit on the furnace grates where my grandmother would often dry her clothes in the winter. We would sit there until our buns were almost roasted and my Grandmother would kick us off. And then it was time for another piece of pumpkin or should I say “punkin” pie as we used to call it. Boy was that good and, of course, homemade.

I think I remember Larry and Donald teasing my Aunt Zoe which they really loved to do. They would concoct some story that was really out of context for my Aunt and then place her right in the middle of it. I never, ever, remember seeing my Aunt take a drink of alcohol but, Larry and Donald would have her sitting on a bar stool at the Elks or Moose Club in their stories. I could never really tell if she enjoyed being the center of attention in this way or not. She would always seem to have a comeback, however, that would just goad them on or vice versa; I really can't remember which. I think my Aunt Bonnie would come to her defense once in a while when things maybe went on a little too long 'cause as I remember neither one of them knew exactly when to quit, especially Donald—what a kidder!

My Aunt Bonnie lived in New York City in those days. And I remember visiting her once. My mother, my grandmother, my brother and I drove to see her in the city. It was great. It was the golden era for a city that has long since fallen into urban blight. But it was a wonderful place back then. Aunt Bonnie took us everywhere: Rockefeller Center, Times Square, Radio City Music Hall, and the Empire State Building. We even took a side trip to Atlantic City. That era was truly the heyday for Atlantic City, too, which has also fallen into decay but was a neat place back then. My Aunt loved showing us around and I got my first taste of the Big City and loved it.

Those days of the Big Ikeler Christmas gatherings, of course, have long since passed. My Grandparents, my Uncles Bobby and Jeb, my Aunt Bonnie and, of course, my great-grandmother Minnie are no longer here. But they, along with those grand old-fashioned Christmases on the farm, live on in my memory where I think I have also rediscovered the true meaning of Christmas for me: family, traditions and love. I think a little boy told me.

I wish everyone who reads this, family and non-family alike, a wonderful and memorable Christmas day from the Musselmans (Tine, Brooke, Alicia and Bud). Atlanta, GA 1994



Season's Greetings
from our house
to your house

