

A Lee County Christmas

Paper dolls, fruitcake and sing-alongs in simpler times

By AlexSandra Lett

After Daddy and Mama (Bud and Ruby Lett) married in 1942 and got through World War II they took on many of the country customs and timeless traditions of their families. They settled on the Lett farm in Buckhorn community in Lee County and continued to keep Christmas focused on religion rather than presents.

As my brother Jimmy, sister Carolyn and I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, Mama and Daddy gave us toys, but they didn't indulge us. On Christmas morning we would awake to three piles of stuff strategically separated—some presents for Jimmy in one corner, others for Carolyn on the couch, and even goodies for the one and only "Sandy Lynn" in a chair. Jimmy always got a toy suitable for boys like a red wagon or a bicycle, and one year a BB gun for taunting the birds, my beloved cats and every living creature. Carolyn and I relished our just-for-girls gifts like a doll or nurses' kit.

One special treat was a baby doll that drank water from a tiny bottle and then wet in her diapers. Mama's PMS kicked in when she had to clean up puddles of baby pee all over the house. When I visited Grandpa (Puzie Lett) at his country store across the road, he showed the doll to everybody who came to Lett's Grocery and Filling Station that day. He would say over and over again, "It beats anything I've ever seen in my life."

My favorite treasures were paper dolls, and I played with the Lennon sisters—Diane, Peggy, Kathy and Janet—until I was a teenager and stopped only because their paper clothes wore out. When Aunt Gladys would tease me about liking a neighbor boy, she would say, "When James comes a courtin' are you going to play paper dolls?"

I liked the paper dolls because they became characters in my dramas, and I could spend hours making up stories about their "citified" lives—far beyond Buckhorn and our humble home.

My last doll arrived when I was 14, and I still remember the painted face, the vibrant blue dress and fake mink coat. Somewhere along the way Mama gave it away to a poor little girl and also passed along my cherished doll-house to a younger cousin.

As Jimmy, Carolyn and I attended school and learned about what other kids were getting for Christmas our wish lists grew longer. The highlight of the holiday season for Carolyn and me was the day the Sears catalog arrived. We looked at it together, and she'd choose an item from one side of the fold, and I'd drool over something on the other page.

Through the years, Christmas presents became more important as we allowed catalogs in the mail and trips to town to inspire us young'ns to ask for more "thangs." Our desires didn't influence Mama and Daddy one bit—they continued to focus on Christmas as being the birthday of Jesus Christ and noted that the baby Jesus was given special but simple gifts from the Wise Men. They reminded us often that if a manger was good enough for Jesus, a farmhouse and simple life was good enough for us.

While participating in special services at church during the holidays, we collected canned goods and used clothes and toys to take to needy folks in the neighborhood. After the annual Christmas program, Santa Claus would drop by and hand out paper bags containing several fruits, a few nuts, a box of raisins and some hard candy. A group from the church also took these treats to shut-ins, sick folks and poor people to add some holiday cheer.

Cakes and pe-cans

One highlight of Christmas was getting involved with Mama's baking projects. She used her extraordinary cooking ability to make goodies for the family and others. Carolyn and I enjoyed helping her mix the sugar cookies—flour, butter, eggs and sugar. We rolled the dough out flat on white cloths and cut it into different designs and put them on greased-with-lard baking pans. To this day there is nothing that tastes better than these old-fashioned tea cakes. The leftover raw batter was equally good—so yummy that my sister and I devoured it together with two spoons, fighting each other for the sweet taste. Eventually one of us won the prize of licking out the bowl.

Mama's claim to fame at Christmas was her cakes, and everyone wanted some. She'd end up fixing pert-near 20 cakes and put them on a platter in creative combinations of ¼ red velvet, ¼ carrot cake, ¼ German chocolate, and ¼ apple nut. Only the most special of friends and family received this "Ruby Cake." Mama also made fruitcakes that people beg for, even ask for seconds—a light one and a dark variety (colored by cocoa and enhanced by dark raisins). Whoever came up with the joke that there are only a few fruitcakes in the world that are rotated year to year as Christmas presents because no one wants to eat them has never tasted Mama's.

While Mama was the queen of cakes, Daddy was the king of "pe-cans." He'd pick out pe-cans night after night so she'd have plenty of nuts for her baking needs. Eventually, our largest pecan tree produced enough for us to package some in plastic bags and give as Christmas presents to kinfolks, neighbors and friends.

Our holiday season officially started

on Thanksgiving Day when we'd all gather around the big pecan tree in the backyard and pick up nuts and put them in buckets in the back porch. Daddy's all-time favorite gift was a nutcracker we gave him one year for Christmas. He loved cracking and plucking out pecans, and we didn't mind one bit.

Daddy's fingers were best spent picking the "git-tar." Among my fondest memories is Daddy playing while we sang "Angels We Have Heard on High." Daddy's guitar is packed away, but there are sacred times imprinted on our minds—sing-alongs with Daddy picking out notes by ear on the guitar and Mama and Daddy holding each other close with us three young'ns gathering around them.

Mama and Daddy always said the best presents last day in and day out, not the "thangs" that strike our fancy for a while. During Christmas and every day there are many blessings all around us. Sometimes it is a pecan just picked from the shell or cookies fresh from the oven, sometimes it is a song played on the guitar, and sometimes it is just a sweet smile that comes from somebody's heart. 📌



Daddy loved pickin' out "pe-cans" and pickin' his "git-tar." Bud was blessed with the ability to play music by ear and asked his daughters to sing hymns over and over again so he could pick out the notes.



Mama, wearing her apron, is stationed in her favorite place, the kitchen that became known as Ruby's Restaurant. Ruby's culinary creations inspired her daughter AlexSandra to preserve them in a book, "Timeless Recipes & Remedies."



Mama proudly displays her culinary creations that are spread out on the kitchen counter at Christmas 1994.

This is a copyrighted excerpt from AlexSandra Lett's popular book of North Carolina nostalgia, "A Timeless Place: Lett's Set a Spell at the Country Store."



The 175-page hardcover book (\$19.95), with about 100 photographs, as well as the newly

released 4-CD audio version (\$21.95), are available from Southern Books & Tales at www.atimelessplace.com. Currently, Ms. Lett is writing a book entitled "Going Crazy... Getting Sane." She is a professional speaker and the author of several other books, including "Timeless Recipes and Remedies: Country Cooking, Customs and Cures." She is a native of the Buckhorn community, Lee County, and a member of Central EMC. Phone: 919-258-9299. E-mail: LettsSetaSpell@aol.com.