

# the Cooks Corner

By Carolyn Nichols

I woke up this morning before daylight. There was a light snow falling, huge lacy snowflakes drifting their way from the heavens to light gently on the earth. Maybe the angels decorate for the holidays too.

Snuggling down in my feather bed, my mind drifted like the snow back over the past month. Momma and Daddy both love Christmas and they strive to teach their children the true message of the holiday.

Preparations for the holiday started on Thanksgiving Day. On that day we drew names out of Daddy's hat. Whoever's name you draw out, you have to do nice things for that person until Christmas Day. Daddy insisted Trapper Jack's name go in the hat. He says Trapper Jack is just like family. Momma smiled weakly but she put his name in the hat. Daddy says sometimes we forget how important it is to do little kindnesses and gestures of goodwill to the people who are nearest and dearest to us.

I know Momma was sad. She couldn't include Lestie and Paul's names. This would be the first Christmas Lestie had spent away from our family. I felt a tear slide down my cheek but I quickly brushed it away. One can't be sad on this glorious day.

Tonight after the Bible reading, we will reveal the name each of us drew out of the hat. I did so want to draw Daddy's name but I drew my sister Edna's name. I was a bit disappointed right at first but it was fun. I brushed her long hair some nights. We talked, giggled and told each other secrets. I took her turn doing dishes so she could work on her Christmas projects (after all one of them might be for me). I warmed rocks in the fireplace, wrapped them and put them in her bed so she could have a bed all toasty and warm. I even carried firewood when it was her turn. Some

mornings I even braided her hair. Momma said it was as good a job as she could have done.

I think I know who drew my name. I'm betting it's Daddy! One morning my mule's stall was cleaned out when I went out to do chores. One morning the chickens were fed and the eggs gathered. My hat suddenly had a new stamped string on it. Twice the cow had been milked and Momma was straining the milk when I got up.

One of my favorite days of the season is the day we cut our Christmas tree. That morning at breakfast Daddy said, "Betsey, I think today is the day." We all know what that means! Momma packs a picnic, we go out in the woods and find the perfect tree. Momma is of a serious nature but not on the day we cut our Christmas tree. Her and Daddy are just like two kids. They laugh, sing, run, and throw snowballs. Why they even make snow angels with Edna and I. It is such fun. Edna and I rode ol' Kitty, our work horse. Daddy skids logs with her and her mate, Matt, all the time so a Christmas tree was a piece of cake for her.

I have no doubt we have the most beautiful tree in the whole world. It is so tall that the lovely angel Momma fashioned out of paper-mache looks like she is keeping watch over Edna and I in our loft bedroom.

Lying here in the bed by the firelight given off by the fireplace, I can see the paper chains that decorate our tree. Every year Momma gets the paper chains out which she has so carefully stored away. We each add a link to the chains each year. Edna added one for Paul and I added one for Lestie in their absence. Momma says the paper chain represents our lives, our experiences as a family linking the memories of our time on this earth together. Like our love for each other, it grows stronger

each year.

We strung popcorn, cut snowflakes out of paper, and made ornaments out of scrap material. We made gingerbread men, cut out sugar cookies and hung them on the tree. Daddy read a scripture from the Bible one evening and it said, "the trees of the field shall clap their hands". I figured if any tree could clap at the joyful anticipation of the birth of Baby Jesus, our tree could.

Every evening after supper, we gathered around the fireplace and took our turn reading scriptures leading up to the birth of Jesus from the Bible. Edna being the artistic one made a beautiful bookmark to mark the passage.

Tonight would be special. We would bundle up in warm clothes. Usually we sit on the porch and look at the stars finding the brightest one to remind us of the Star of Bethlehem. Momma will read about the birth of Jesus and his message to all of love and kindness. She would read of how it is our duty and privilege to carry on His message. But tonight would be different because Trapper Jack was helping me with my special surprise.

Momma was already up. I could smell delicious smells drifting up from the kitchen. Daddy had a hog roasting in a pit outside. Trapper Jack shot two wild turkeys and brought them to Momma. She will roast one turkey today and one tomorrow. I know her heart aches because Lestie and Paul can't be with us for the holiday dinner.

She and Daddy will take the turkey that is roasting now along with a basket of food to an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Norton. They live over on the south ridge. Trapper Jack says Old Man Norton is getting a little long in the tooth but he still has a lot of grit. Momma heard they had a bit of bad luck and both were ailing.

Every other morning, Momma would have hollered at us girls to get up but it was her and Daddy's custom to exchange their gifts to each other in private on Christmas Eve morning. Daddy had sworn me to secrecy. There was a beautiful coat Momma had been admiring for months in Gibson's Dry Goods store window. Now there was no doubt that Momma needed a new coat. Her other one was plumb worn out. I asked her one day when she was standing in front of the store window if she would like that coat. "Oh," she said, almost startled like I had caught her in a

fantasy, "it is truly the most beautiful coat I've ever laid my eyes on. It is just to be admired from afar. It is far too expensive."

I don't have any idea how many hides Daddy sold. I have a notion Trapper Jack gave Daddy some of his hides to sell too. One thing I know for sure, in a couple of minutes Momma would have her beautiful coat.

This year I couldn't believe my luck for I knew both their secrets. There was a rifle Daddy had been wanting for the longest time. One day when I was with Daddy and Trapper Jack at the dry goods store, Mr. Gibson was showing this rifle to Daddy and Trapper Jack. Daddy sure did take a shine to that rifle. Trapper Jack told him he best hand it back for he believed that Daddy was falling in love with that rifle. Said he was caressing it like he would a beautiful woman. I saw Daddy glance in my direction and told Trapper Jack to hush.

One afternoon when I was in town with Momma, she gave Edna and I a couple of pennies to get some candy. She said she would meet us in an hour at the dry goods store. I just happened to look out the window and I saw her go in Dr. Robuck's office. She was in there a long time. I got real worried. What if Momma was sick?

Edna was helping Mrs. Gibson put out some bolts of material so I slipped out the door and hot footed it to Dr. Robuck's office. I found Momma cleaning Dr. Robuck's office. She swore me to secrecy. She was cleaning this office, selling eggs, taking in extra sewing, even baking for the restaurant so she could make enough money to buy Daddy the rifle he wanted so badly.

Edna woke up and we laid in my bed and peeked through the railing on the loft. Momma was so thrilled with her coat. She hugged and kissed Daddy. Edna whispered, "We shouldn't be watching!" but we didn't move. Momma put the coat on and said she had never had anything so fine. She twirled and swirled around the kitchen. Daddy gathered her up in his arms and they danced by the firelight while Momma was singing softly.

Momma went in the pantry and returned with Daddy's rifle. I could tell he couldn't believe his eyes. His eyes filled with tears. He said, "Betsey, you shouldn't have." He held the gun tightly. It was like as long as he could touch it, it was real.

Momma kept touching the fabric of her coat.

Edna and I let them have their special time together then we bounded down the stairs. Today would be a busy day, lots of baking. After dinner Daddy would hitch the team and they would take the basket of food, load of wood and the presents we had made to the Nortons.

I ran to do my chores. Trapper Jack said he would be by after Momma and Daddy left for the Nortons and help me get the barn ready for my surprise.

We watched them drive off. Momma was in her new coat and Daddy had his new rifle (just in case they saw a varmint he said). Trapper Jack came riding in just as they were leaving. It was snowing a little harder by now.

"Here," he said and presented them with a bear skin robe he had made, "you all might need this before you get back."

Trapper Jack and I headed for the barn. Edna was baking a cake so that after the scriptures were read in the evening, we could come back in the house and celebrate Jesus' birthday with a birthday cake. Edna wanted to clean the house so it would be spotless for Momma. Trapper Jack cut a star out of wood and I covered it with yellow fabric. He hung it outside the hayloft and rigged up a lantern. He said he would go up and light it when the time was right. It would look just like the star of Bethlehem.

We put fresh straw in the manger, I wrapped my doll in a blanket and put it in the manger to be Baby Jesus. As I laid the doll in the manger, I heard Trapper Jack say softly under his breath, "Such a cross to bear for such a tiny baby." Trapper Jack fixed another lantern so it would shine on the manger scene we were creating. We toted Momma's sewing mannequin out to the barn, covered it with a white sheet and I wrapped Momma's blue shawl around the shoulders. We positioned it just right so it looked for all the world like Mary was tending to Baby Jesus. It was the perfect setting for Momma to read the scriptures of Jesus's birth to us.

While we were readying the stable, Momma and Daddy were delivering their Christmas goodies to the Nortons. Momma and Daddy explained to us later what had happened at the Nortons. Momma said they lived in a one room cabin. That one room served as a kitchen,

living room and bedroom. It was sparsely furnished but neat as a pin. Outside the graying boards showed signs of age and weather. Momma said she felt the cabin was held together by the lumber of love and nails of hope. Mrs. Norton's curtains had been patched and mended so often the threads made a lacy like pattern on the threadbare material.

Mrs. Norton's arms were bandaged and Mr. Norton was walking with a cane, still limping considerably. He had big bruises on the side of his face. Daddy said, "Gracious, Mildred and Zeb, what have you two been tangling with?"

Zeb said, "Oh, we're doing much better now. Just had a little streak of bad luck."

"What happened?" Momma questioned.

Zeb related the series of events. "Mildred was cooking breakfast. It was right cold in the cabin. The wood supply was getting low so we were rationing the wood. I'll explain the reason for that in a minute," Zeb said. "Mildred slipped her coat on to keep the chill off and she caught the sleeve on fire and burnt her arm right smart. Dr. Robuck sure had been good to come out and take care of us."

"As for me and the shape I'm in, I was out hunting. I saw a deer standing on the river bank. My eyesight is not what it used to be and I was walking, sighting my rifle in and I just got too close to the bluff edge. It just gave way beneath me. The gun and I took quite a tumble. My gun fell in the river and the the current was running so strong, it washed my gun away before I came to my senses."

"Zeb," Daddy said, "I brought you some firewood. How about you come and show me where you want it unloaded." They went outside.

Momma said she looked out the window and she could see three grave markers where they had buried their three children. She said later it struck her how many hardships this woman had endured and overcome yet never lost her faith. Momma said that she felt so blessed when she thought of her family, our cozy cabin, plenty of food, she just had to do something for this courageous woman. She told us, "I took off my coat and said, 'I do believe you are in need of a coat and this one looks to be just your size.'"

"Mrs. Norton hesitated and I said, 'I really need to do this!'" Momma helped her put the coat on. As Mildred touched

the fabric, she said, "Never in my life have I ever had anything so fine." Momma told her that it was about time she did. Mrs. Norton hugged Momma.

Just then the cabin door opened and in came Daddy with Zeb. Zeb was grinning from ear to ear and he was holding Daddy's new rifle. He looked at Mildred in her new coat and he said, "I guess we just had the best Christmas ever."

"Betsey, we better be getting home. The kids will be getting worried," Daddy said.

When they got to the wagon, Daddy said, "You are going to freeze!" and he started to take off his coat. Momma shook her head. "No!" she said, "I'll just wrap up in Trapper Jack's bear skin robe." Momma smiled and said, "Somehow I never felt warmer."

Daddy put his arm around her and said, "I know just what you mean. Let's go home!"

That evening Momma put on her old threadbare coat and all bundled up we headed to the barn for my surprise. Trapper Jack, true to his word, slipped out the back ahead of the family and had the lantern lit. The lantern at the hayloft shone on our homemade star. Momma said the star looked as bright and beautiful as she imagined the star to be that the wise men followed. Inside the lantern shone on the manger and our devoted Mary. Around the manger stood our milk cow, my donkey, our sheep and my cur dog pup curled up in front of the manger. There were pigeons cooing over head on the rafters. It was our version of the nativity scene.

Momma sat down on the kitchen chair we had brought out for her and opened her Bible. But before she could speak, the barn doors opened and in ran Lestie and Paul. "How can this be?" Momma cried as she hugged Lestie and Paul. We couldn't believe our eyes. We had all received what we wanted most for Christmas, our family to all be together!

Lestie said, "Trapper Jack arranged everything! He found a supply train that would be passing close to our place. One of the drivers stayed at our place to look after our livestock and Paul took his place as a driver. The fellow will get his full pay and we get to come home for Christmas." I saw Daddy wipe a tear away.

Momma's eyes were brimming with tears. She turned to Trapper Jack. He just smiled and shook his head. "No need to

say anything, Betsey. After all, I drew your name out of the hat on Thanksgiving Day!"

Momma and Daddy explained what happened earlier at the Norton's. Momma said, "In the scriptures it says faith without deeds are not enough. Seeing a person needing warm clothes, food and a way to keep warm and saying to that person 'I wish you well. Keep warm and don't be hungry,' but doing nothing to help that person they don't have faith. What good are kind words without actions? We show our faith by our deeds." She hugged Lestie and Paul and said, "If you do you will reap benefits a hundred fold."

Momma opened her Bible and read the Christmas story. I understood the message of love was the same that night in that humble stable so many years ago as it was this evening in our humble stable.

*Traditions are important. They are part of the mortar that forms the cement that keeps families together. Bertha's family understood the importance of traditions for they are remembered and looked forward to each year. Christmas at their house was not about money. It was about the reason for the season and memories made to last a lifetime. They taught their children by their actions the importance of love, faith, kindness and family.*

### **Merry Christmas!**

*Our neighbor gave me some pears. I've been fixing these baked pears. The whole kitchen smells wonderful while they are baking.*

### **BAKED PEARS**

4 cups sliced, peeled pears  
1/2 cup sugar  
1 tablespoon cornstarch  
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon  
1/4 teaspoon ginger



1/4 teaspoon nutmeg  
3/4 cup flour  
1/2 teaspoon baking powder  
1/8 teaspoon salt  
1/4 cup cold butter or stick margarine  
1/3 cup brown sugar

In a bowl combine the first six ingredients. Put in a 9 inch square dish coated with non-stick cooking spray. In a bowl combine the flour, brown sugar, baking powder and salt. Cut in butter until crumbly. Sprinkle over the pear mixture. Bake at 350 degrees for 40-45 minutes.

*This recipe for Fruit Pizza was sent to me by a good friend in Alabama. It is really pretty, not too sweet but a real treat to eat.*

### **FRUIT PIZZA**

1 roll of store bought sugar cookie dough  
1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened  
1/2 cup powdered sugar  
Fresh strawberries  
Fresh blueberries  
Fresh peaches  
Fresh raspberries  
(Or your favorite fruit)

Roll sugar cookie dough out on small pizza pan. Bake in 350 degree oven for 7-8 minutes or until the large cookie test done. Cool. Mix 8 ounces cream cheese that has been softened with 1/2 cup powdered sugar. Spread over large cookie, top with your favorite fresh fruits. You can divide it into 4 or 8 sections and put different fruits. It will look like a fruit topped pizza.

*I put up kraut this year. This is a very good salad. I've had people come back for seconds and thirds of the salad and they swore they didn't like kraut.*

### **KRAUT SALAD**

1 cup sugar  
1/2 cup vinegar  
1 pound can kraut, cut fine  
1 cup celery, chopped  
1 cup bell peppers, chopped  
1 cup onions, chopped  
1 cup carrot, grated

Boil sugar and vinegar until sugar is dissolved. Let cool. Mix all other ingredients together and pour sugar mixture over all. Refrigerate. This salad is better made 24 hours ahead.