

Christmas Traditions in the Blue Ridge Mountains



The soft glow of an oil lamp and pine boughs on a windowsill evoke fond memories of an era when Christmas was less commercial and more of a time for families to get together and give loved ones simple, handmade gifts from the heart. A tree was brought home from the woods and decorated with garlands of strung popcorn and colorful paper chains. It was a slower time when people had the pleasure of quietly talking around the fire and perhaps peeling some coveted holiday oranges for the little ones. These and many other traditions have been passed down from generation to generation, making Christmas a very special time of year for the mountain people.

Upon moving to the hamlet of Love in 1980, I was determined to make our first Christmas memorable by keeping some of these early traditions alive. Living in a rustic hunting camp with a high ceiling, I wanted a tall tree to fill one corner of the living room. My neighbor, Gladys Coffey, said they had some large trees on their property and I was welcome to cut the top out of one. I shinnied up the trunk of a real beauty, wielding a hand saw and holding on for dear life as the cut portion tumbled to the ground. The tree was so massive it had to be cut several more times before we could get it in the house.

Once in place, it was decorated with red plaid bows, candy canes, pine cones, bird nests, strings of popcorn and white doves cut out from a box of Christmas cards and placed among the branches. We trooped up the mountain in search of running cedar for the mantle and mistletoe which was shot out of oak trees and hung from a doorway in hopes of a holiday kiss. By the world's standards, the decorations in the camp were plain but I was thrilled to be carrying on some of the early customs that my older neighbors celebrated when they were growing up.



The large Christmas tree at the camp, decorated with homespun ornaments

Hazel Campbell Fitzgerald, who grew up on Hat Creek, relayed this story to me about what her family did at Christmas.

“At Christmastime, we’d put up a tree and us kids would glue paper chains together to decorate it. Sometimes we’d take the silver paper inside cigarette packs and wrap it around sycamore balls and hang them on the tree, too. Mama and Daddy would go down to Tommy Carter’s store and buy each of us kids a little toy of some kind. Us girls usually got a baby doll but I remember once I got a little wind-up tin toy where a dog chased a cat and the cat chased a fish. I don’t know whatever happened to that toy but I wish I would have hung on to it.”

Sending Christmas cards was a popular tradition in earlier years, just as it is today. Many were embossed with beautiful scenes on the front and a one-cent postage stamp was all it took to send it on its way. I found several of these cards and the stamped envelopes they came in, among my late mother-in-law’s possessions.

I asked my elderly neighbor, Johnny Coffey, if his family did anything special when he was a child. He said his mother always baked an apple butter cake for the holiday and it was something he always looked forward to. Johnny said it was a four-layer pound cake made from scratch with apple butter spread between layers and on top. That Christmas I attempted to recreate his mother’s cake and when it was done, I walked up through the woods to Johnny’s house and presented it to him. When he opened the box and saw it, he began to weep and said it was the first one he ever had since his mother died. It was the best present I ever gave someone; a treasured memory from childhood.

My husband Billy said Christmas in the holler where he was born was not about getting presents on the morning of December 25th. The holiday stretched out several weeks and consisted of walking to each of his aunts and uncles' homes for a meal and having them, in turn, come back for a meal at their cabin

He said fresh oranges and peppermint sticks were delicious treats he only got during the season and he recalls receiving very few toys, usually given by one of the relatives. He still has the little horse-drawn metal pull toy given to him by an older cousin when he was a child.



Johnny's homemade applebutter cake



Billy Coffey's horse-drawn metal toy he received for Christmas

Entertainments were also popular in the one-room schoolhouses in the Love area. My father-in-law, Saylor, remembered a funny incident that happened at the old Ivy Hill School where the children from the holler attended.

"My older brother, Pettit, came to the program dressed as Santa Claus and was trying to read his part in the play. It was getting dark so he told me to hold the oil lamp a little closer, so could read better. When I put the light up to him, I accidentally caught his beard on fire! He ran behind the sheet we had strung across the front of the classroom and put out the fire in his beard so the little children wouldn't see. Everyone had a big laugh over it. Later in the evening several people played string music and everyone enjoyed it."



Ivy Hill School, early 1900s

Lillie Puckett Napier was 94 years of age when I interviewed her and she said Christmas at the Puckett home was one big get-together with neighbors visiting up and down Stoney Creek.



Lillie Puckett Napier

“We would go from house to house, playing games, making candy, sharing a meal. Our family had a live tree that we would decorate. Mama left us kids at Granny’s house while she went Christmas shopping in Nellysford. She told me not to peek inside the bags she brought home but I did and found two doll babies; one dressed in pink and the other in blue. On Christmas Eve I told Mama, as I was going upstairs to bed, that I hoped Santa Claus would bring me the dolly in the pink dress. She knew at once I had peeked at the presents!”

Vera Falls, one of nine children, grew up along the North Fork of the Tye River and told me Christmas was a time her mother did a lot of baking.

“She would bake cakes, pies and donuts for us. We’d cut a tree and decorate it with anything we could make and hang candy canes on it. In the fall, we all got a new pair of shoes that we were so proud of, and we would save the shoe boxes and put them on top of the

of the table for Santa Claus to fill. On Christmas morning the boxes would have oranges, nuts and candy in them; things we didn't get every day."

These simple traditions were part of people's lives who were born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and will never be forgotten. But modern-day people have started traditions all their own, making unforgettable memories equally as important for their children and grandchildren.

Brian and Kristin Gembara, who live near Chicago but have family roots in Nelson County, Virginia, started a tradition of giving matching pajamas to their two children and opening gifts on Christmas Eve. As the children became teenagers Kris thought they may find the matching pajamas babyish so she and Brian joined in and began wearing them, too, continuing a fun family tradition. Christmas night, after all the family visiting is over, they go to a late movie.

Chris and Penny Miller and their two sons always go out to eat at a Chinese restaurant on Christmas Eve and in the morning, they go to Penny's mother's house for

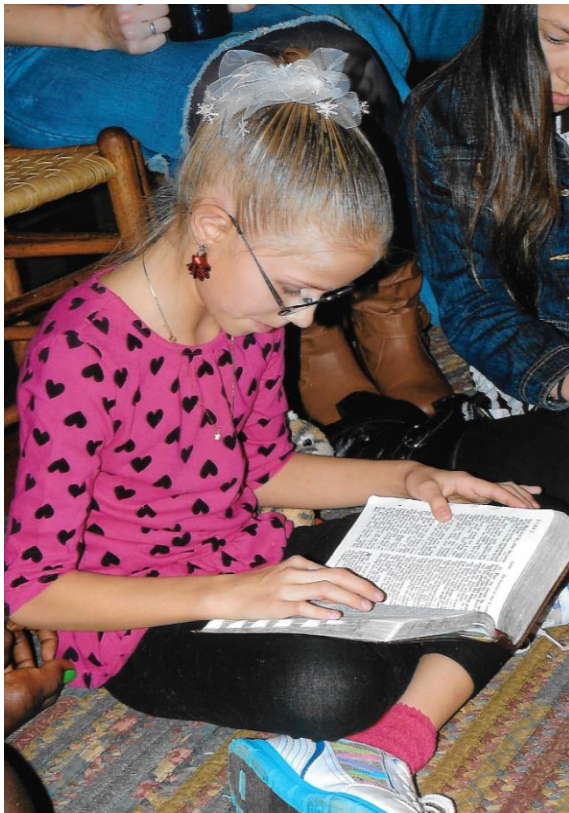


Vera Coffey Falls

Christmas breakfast and later for a big meal with friends and the rest of the immediate family.

Stacy Johnson of Afton, her husband Todd and their three daughters have a tradition of having the family in on Christmas Eve and serving the same exact snacks and finger foods each year. Later in the evening they all sit down to watch Earl Hamner's classic, "The Homecoming". Stacy also puts up and decorates multiple trees throughout her home.

In our own home, after getting the family members together to enjoy a holiday meal, we clean up the kitchen and before we begin opening presents, we have a tradition of letting one of our grandchildren read the Christmas story from the second chapter of Luke's gospel, reminding us again that the greatest gift to mankind was, and still is, the gift of God's Son.



Tressia Coffey reading the Christmas story