

## CHRISTMASES LONG AND NOT SO LONG AGO

I don't know which is the earliest Christmas that I remember. We have a black and white photo somewhere of Mom playing the piano, with Dad sitting beside her on the piano stool, and Bill, Harry and I in our pajamas with hymnbooks in our hands singing what must have been Christmas carols since there's a Christmas tree in the corner in the living room of the old, white frame house we rented from Mr. Neal Craig on Sharon Amity Rd between 1948-9 and 1955. I guess Frosty first and later Bing caused us to associate snow with Christmas. Whether it was on or near Christmas I don't know, but I remember Dad and Bill racing each other, barefooted if memory serves me correctly or maybe in or also in their under wear through the snow to the chicken house behind the house, and back. Don't remember who won; also, the only time I ever remember Dad running anywhere, but I do remember thinking it was the coolest, literally and figuratively, event I'd witnessed to that point in my young life.

The first Christmas I have a pretty good recollection of was when Bill got his first bike. He must have been 9 or 10, me, 5 or 6 and Harry, 3 or 4. Dad bought it 2<sup>nd</sup> hand from Mr. Craig. I think it had been his daughter's but I don't remember if it was a girl's bike or not (regardless, I'm sure, at first chance, he took the fenders and chain guard off, as all self-respecting, red-bloodied, American, well at least those we knew, did). I got police gear; a badge, whistle, billy stick and handcuffs, all stapled to a piece of cardboard. I'm sure I was thrilled by it and probably ripped them right off and started blowing my whistle and handcuffing Harry, making not a citizen's but an official arrest. His only offense was being available and smaller than me. I don't know what Harry got, but I'm sure it was something pretty cool, as he always seemed to hit the jackpot.

I don't know whose bike Bill learned to ride on, probably Joe Poole's or Sonny Reynolds's but he knew how, and took off down the drive and out onto Sharon Amity, with me in hot pursuit, blowing my whistle for him to stop and waving my billy stick at a fleeing Billy. I chased him down Sharon Amity and followed when he turned onto Windermere, past Uncle Jack and Aunt Virginia's, if in fact they had moved there yet, and down to the Kisers. I don't remember if he stopped in or just turned around and headed home, but I was plumb tuckered out and made a puffing holiday visit to my Aunt Verla and cousins Gene, Syd (or was it Sid), Mickey, Mary Lou and Frankie. Aunt Verla called Dad and he drove over and got me. Seems like I remember them all getting a good laugh out of it. I never was a distance runner.

I don't remember any other specific Christmases on Sharon Amity, but I do remember how excited we were to go "down in the country" to the Caldwell farm where Grandma lived and going out in the pasture to pick out the perfect cedar Christmas tree. Of course it had to be the right height and, maybe a fore runner of our girl watching days, the right shape! Most cedars grew in fence rows since the birds sitting on the fences dropped, I don't know whether from their beaks or their fannies, their berry/seeds and cedars sprouted up. It's ironic that most of the fence posts were cut cedars. Often the barbed wire was nailed to growing trees when they got big enough. But cedars in a fence line usually were stunted on the fence side or were too entwined with the fence to make a good Christmas tree, so the best shaped ones were free standing in the field, growing there I guess because a flying bird dropped it from one end or the other. Bombs Away! Dad would cut our selection with his handsaw and we would tie it

on top the car and excitedly head home, thereby converting that beautiful, green cedar, enjoying its life in the country, minding its own business, oblivious to the customs of the season, into a lifeless rack to hang inanimate objects on in the suburbs, which is what I guess Sharon Amity would have been considered then. O Tannenbaum , O Tannenbaum, how lovely your branches will be, for about 2 weeks! But cutting a cedar tree for Christmas is in my DNA. I don't think I've ever bought a tree.

Though I can't attach to specific Christmases, I do remember lots of specifics, mainly presents. Santa brought us plenty of stuff to build with: Tinker toys, Lincoln logs, plastic bricks (Lego predecessors in two ways; 1)as building units and 2)a real waker- upper when stepped on barefooted in the dark) and an Erector set; in fact, we probably had several sets of tinkers, bricks and erectors because we could build some pretty impressive structures. In the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, for a science project, I made a Van de Graff generator, or reasonable, though not functional, facsimile of one, partially out of our Erector set. Models to assemble: planes, ships, cars. Warfare stuff: a Davey Crockett inspired plastic log walled fort, with watch towers, a gate, shelves on the inside of the walls to stand the soldiers and even cannon (isn't cannon also the plural?) on, and Indians to shoot and horses for them to ride and ladders to scale the walls. Then we graduated to WWII soldiers carrying rifles and bazookas and hurling hand grenades. Harry and I fought many a battle between those pale and red faces, preparing us for our own battle royales, fought with belt and a thick, not flimsy, yard stick in the back bedroom on Rama Rd. Earlier battles, primarily between me and Bill, as Harry may have been too little in the britch (short for britches, a Kiser favorite saying employed when I wanted to know or join in something and they didn't want to be aggravated) to participate in was with rolled up newspapers with the lights out and lamps and other breakables put away in the Sharon Amity living room.

And, of course, our favorite, the Lionel electric train. I think the original consisted of just an oval track and a coal fired locomotive with a cow catcher on the front, followed by a coal car and a boxcar or two, and a flat car or two and then the caboose. I don't think the original had any frills like switches and side tracks, or water tower or a coal pile, or crossings, or stations and other buildings but I think some of that was added later. There was a big black transformer that powered it. it's a wonder the locomotive survived the many times we wrecked it, usually intentionally or at least unsurprisingly, as we turned the control switch all the way up to get it roaring down the straight-a-way heading into the first curve. Bill, don't you have the Caldwell R&R? Does it still run? It gave us hours and hours of pleasure, as did the electric football game in which you couldn't control the direction your ball carrier was going in. The quarterback with the spring loaded throwing arm was no Tom Brady or Patrick Mahomes, rarely completing a pass with the felt football. But what we really got into was the hockey game. One goalie we named Osgood Conklin, the principal on a tv comedy series called Our Miss Brooks, who answered his phone, "Wasted words are wasted time, Osgood Conklin on the line. Make it brief!" When you got the marble puck to your man in the right corner beside your goal, Osgood had better watch out because a slap shot the whole length of the ice was coming his way. We loved that game so much we wore out the gears on the end of the rods you turned to make you players pivot. I wonder if they still make it. I think I'll look it up. I'd like to take Bill or Harry or Tommy or Tim or Sam, even Anna, though she beats me at everything I play her in, right now!

Mom usually would take us uptown, first by walking us up the railroad tracks to Oakhurst to catch the bus and later in the 1938 four door Chevy sedan she and Dad bought from her Aunt Pat and Uncle Joe, to look around at the decorated store windows and do a little Christmas shopping of our own. I don't know who's \$ we spent, I guess what we'd saved collecting old newspapers and magazines from neighbors and selling them to the Chesapeake Paper Co on West Trade where we hauled them in the Chevy with the back seat out, or maybe Mom gave us a little to spend. We, or at least I, didn't get an allowance. Maybe Harry got a little something because the paper business was primarily owned and operated by Bill, with me as originally a hireling and later brought in as a junior partner, good preparation for my beginning as a hireling lawyer with Frank Griffin in Sept, '71 for \$9500/yr, graduating to junior partner status in a little over 2 years. I think we usually got Dad a tie and Mom something practical, like a flower sifter when hers wore out. One year we got her a waffle iron. I remember Harry getting her a model plane or ship or some such, disguising something he really wanted as something for which he knew she would probably say, "Harry, that's so sweet. Why don't you put it together for me?" Mom might have acted fooled, Harry, but you sure didn't fool Bill and me. We knew what you were up to!

Which reminds me of the coolest "gift", though not at Christmas, that we ever got. We pestered Mom into filling out a contest form to win a Shetland pony at Elders, the local grocery at Oakhurst where she first shopped when we moved to Sharon Amity and continued after we moved to our new house that Dad built on Rama Rd when I was 10. She started shopping at the Winn-Dixie in Amity Gardens shopping center on Independence Blvd when Bill started bagging groceries there when he was about 15. Elders is where Janet and I bought our first groceries as a married couple when we lived in a duplex off Independence in the summer of '67, before my senior year at Davidson. Back to the pony; SHE WON IT! We came home from school one day and there, tied up in the back yard was a pony! YOWWEE! We couldn't believe it, our very own pony. I don't remember much about the details; how long we had him, or her (only a day or two, I think); what we fed him (probably weeds we pulled up in the field and hand fed him, maybe a carrot or two we pilfered from the fridge); whether we rode him even once (I don't think I did); whether we named him (if so, I don't remember his name); or discussions about his future (if we were consulted, it was only tangentially). With visions of no, not sugar plums, but our new steed in our heads, we came home from school a few days after his arrival, excited about the prospects of our new mode of propulsion, to find that our Trigger or Silver or Fury or even Little Mr. Ed was gone and his replacement was a new couch in the living room, which we rarely visited, usually only when there was special company (Uncle Jack and Aunt Virginia and other regulars were entertained in the den), and on which we rarely sat and never reclined (I think Mom and Dad figured that Janet was a special girl to me when, upon bringing her for a Sunday visit when she was at UNCG, after lunch, they came in the living room and I was reclined on that couch with my head in her lap). Well, it was Mom's pony, not ours.

And then, of course, there were the presents all boys coveted: weaponry. Inspired by our cowboy heroes, Wild Bill Hickok and his sidekick, Jingles P Jones, Hopalong Cassidy (my first football hero was Howard "Hopalong" Cassidy, the '55 Heisman trophy winner from Notre Dame, simply because of his name) and the Long Ranger and Tonto, just to name a few, we got our share of cap pistols with their roll of mini-explosives to mimic gunfire. I can still smell the sulfuric odor that resulted from the bangs,

probably much like the intoxicating “smell of napalm in the morning”, and it seems like some small sparks would fly out. It’s a good thing there weren’t cap rifles where a sighting eye with be much closer to the sparks than a pistol held at arm’s length. Maybe Mattel thought of that! But the granddaddy of pistols was the six shooter Santa brought Harry, with a barrel about 8” long which would fold down so the cylinder could be removed and loaded with actual size bullets when he pushed the latch. He shot a lot of bad guys, mostly me, with that sucker.

And then we graduated to BB guns. Our first was the Daisy Red Ryder lever action, our first actual potentially dangerous weapon. I don’t remember Dad giving us much, if any, safety training except he probably told us not to shoot it at each other or, the universal, “don’t put your eye out”. If I or Rusty Abernathy received that warning, we didn’t pay much attention to it. He was one of my close friends since first grade. The Abernathys lived on Monroe Rd, just a block or so toward Charlotte from Oakhurst school, with their deep yard backing up to the railroad tracks. I loved to go over to his house after school because it was a veritable boys’ paradise. His dad had a real WWII Navy Hellcat airplane in their backyard! Can you imagine! I knew the Hellcat, and got a kick out of saying it (one of the few chances to permissibly use what was otherwise deemed, like George Carlin’s 7 words you can’t say on tv, one of the only 4 “cuss” words we knew, the others being the homophone for dam, and the two others being the back alley words for human liquid and solid waste, not to be uttered in the Caldwell household \*\*) from WWII movies or maybe Victory at Sea. I think Bill or I had put together a plastic model of one, and here was a REAL HELLCAT, right in Rusty’s backyard.

He and I would take turns sitting in the cockpit, just think of that, an 8 or 9 year old actually sitting in the cockpit of a real Hellcat. Unbelievable! And the one in the cockpit would pee (that word was permissible) in the funnel that pilots in combat strapped around their waist in order to, using Col Mac Tweed’s phrase and therefore probably a military term, “relieve their kidneys”, while the other watched it drip out of the tube protruding from the bottom of the fuselage. And it would still crank. Their house was across the street from a Methodist Church and Rusty said his Dad had something of a running feud with the preacher or some of its leaders, and occasionally on a summer Sunday morning when the windows in the sanctuary were up, he would crank his Hellcat up and it was so loud the congregants couldn’t even hear the organ!

Rusty finished high school with me but by then we’d drifted apart. I was telling Janet about him back in the summer and she looked him up and found him on the internet in Concord. I called and talked with his wife who told me he had had a stroke recently and was convalescing in a nursing home on Craig Ave, only blocks from where we lived on Sharon Amity. She said she knew he would love to hear from me but that some days his memory and speech were better than others and said she would tell him about hearing from me and she would let me know when she thought would be a good time to call. She did and I called him. He knew who I was and we had a nice chat. He graduated as an electrical engineer from Clemson and then joined the Air Force and flew in Vietnam, then flew for Piedmont Airlines for years. He told me about how his Dad found the plane somewhere in SC, that the wings folded up (which I didn’t know) since it was a carrier plane, and he winched it on the back of a truck and drove it to their house. He said he got in trouble once because he wasn’t supposed to crank it but he did and the prop wash blew over a neighbor’s old chicken coop.

Well, back to BB guns. The railroad behind the Abernathy's went thru a cut, so there were fairly steep and high banks on each side. We would dig out steps up the banks and shovel out a little cave half way up and play war, with me on one bank and Rusty on the other, shoot BB's at each other. I don't remember if they hurt, but probably not much since we were some distance apart. Pretty sure I didn't discuss that activity with Mom or Dad or that might have stopped my visits to Hellcat Heaven.

We learned the hard way that after cocking, the lever needed to be returned to its natural resting place beneath the stock. If you left the lever dangling, when you pulled the trigger it would slam up against your three non-trigger fingers resting under the stock. You would only make that mistake once. Harry and I became pretty good shots with the BB, shooting out the remaining glass in the windows of the old shed behind the little house Dad bought beside ours on Rama Rd (I think we called it the Warner house for the family he bought it from) for Grandpa and Grandma Beaty to move into. And of course, all red-blooded American boys eventually feel the hunter pull of their hunter/gatherer instinct and the strong urge to bring home chickadees and sparrows, to fill the larder. We stalked them relentlessly, to the point the word must have spread among them and fewer and fewer landed within our range. Not to be outwitted by our feathered prey, we spread some bread crumbs and hid in the garage awaiting their discovery. I think we lured a few to their demise, but soon either they got on to us or our consciences did and we soon abandoned that heinous ploy.

The last bird I ever shot was on Christmas day. I had gotten the next level of the Daisy Red Ryder that morning, the more powerful pump. Anxious to try it out, I ventured into the small patch of woods between our house and Uncle Jack's and spotted a pretty good size bird near the top of a tall oak and took aim. Hit him right in the head and he plummeted down, landing right at my feet with a sickening thud. I remember it being maybe a meadowlark. It was yellowish brown, certainly bigger than a sparrow or chickadee, bigger even than a robin or blue jay. When typing this several days ago I was thinking that since we seldom see meadowlarks in winter, it's probably because they go south and that the bird I shot must not have been one. Then, a day or so later, a bird lover said on Facebook that he'd seen a couple of Meadowlarks recently in Ky, an anomaly, since they are winter migrants, so maybe the fellow my BB found was an unfortunate anomaly, in more ways than one since I've never shot another bird. I was tempted to shoot a woodpecker that was destroying a wooden gable vent at our house on Martha Dr in Monroe, but I finally foiled him by covering it with chicken wire.

Finally, Santa heard Harry's requisition for a real weapon, one that could bring down big game, and lo and behold, his request was met with a single shot .22 rifle that showed up under the tree to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. But there was to be no peace for the feathered and furry creatures who theretofore had resided in blissful serenity in the woods below the garden, nor for the plastic model aircraft carrier, battleships and their tenders floated down the creek in the woods, only to be sunk by aerial bombardment, one bullet at a time, though some were torpedoed with firecrackers. I borrowed Harry's .22 one Saturday afternoon to go bag meat for supper and blasted a squirrel, proudly bringing it home for Mom to stew. Dad showed me how to, skin him, insisting, if I remember correctly, that I do most of the bloody work myself. I can still remember the sound, which I can't think of a word to accurately describe, that was made when I pulled his furry outer wear over his skull. "YUCK", to use Janet's word and phrase, "that's gross", and it was. I don't think I've intentionally killed an animal,

except a snake or two and, do they count, fishes since. Incidentally, Mom did make squirrel stew and it was pretty good, tasted like chicken. Nothing to do with Christmas, but I do remember one other furry creature story. Dad taught us how to make a rabbit box and we set one out and baited it in the edge of the garden. I don't remember whether we ever caught one or not or if so, what we did with it. I remember Dad or Grandpa Beaty telling us how to kill one by hitting it in the head with a stick. I don't remember if Bill or Harry ever whacked Br'er Rabbit but I know I never did. Speaking of Grandpa, he was easy to shop for at Christmas. A box of Brown Mule plug chewing tobacco was all he ever wanted. Also speaking of Grandpa and furry animals, he told us how he used to get rid of unwanted kittens by tying them up in a burlap sack with a heavy rock and throwing them in the river. There were no unwanted cats around our house. Harry loved and fed strays that came up. One night a man pulled in our driveway and came to the door and said he had hit a cat and that it was in the ditch and he wasn't sure if it was dead, and wanted to know if it was ours. Harry heard me tell him we didn't have a cat and he corrected me, going back to his room and coming out with his .22. He walked by the man's car and leveled his rifle at the dog in the car, then, thank goodness, lowered it and went out and with one shot, put his cat out of its misery.

I guess by the time I was 13 or 14 Santa thought I was too old for fun stuff and more in need of clothes, nice to have but hard to get too excited about. As I said, Harry usually hit the Christmas jackpot but even he never raked it in like cousin Johnny, Uncle Jack and Aunt Virginia's youngest, I guess 6-7 years younger than Harry. On Christmas morning, after we'd tried on our new clothes, Harry and I would high tail it over to see what Johnny had gotten, and we were rarely disappointed. If I remember correctly, he probably wasn't over 7 or 8 when he got a go kart, something we'd only dreamed about. In fairness to our Santa, we wouldn't have had anyplace to ride it unless we'd have built a dirt track around the garden, which Santa Joe would have frowned on. But if I remember, Uncle Joe didn't object to little Johnny throwing up dirt back there. As I think about it, was it a go kart or a mini-cycle or maybe both, one following the demise of the other, which I probably aided in; how often have I heard, usually from Mom, "Tom, get off that, you're too big for it, you're going to break it", usually regarding Harry's stuff, and I was. I'm still just a big kid, but more careful about what I get on!

Here's something I hadn't thought about in years until a couple of weeks ago when my current Christmas present arrived, a heavy, white terry cloth bath robe Janet ordered from LandsEnd for me to wear scurrying to and from the hot tub. Of course I've already opened and am using it most every day. Boy is it warm. Thanks, Dear! Mom made Janet and me both flannel robes after she came to visit and noticed that we didn't keep our house as warm as she did her apartment and though we turned the temperature up when she visited, I guess she was still chilly and figured we must have been, too. We still use them. I'm embarrassed to tell this story but what's a little humiliation when a good story's involved? I don't remember if it was for Christmas, but when I was probably 13 or 14, unsure, as I guess most adolescent boys are, of what constitutes a REAL man, I showed Mom a picture in a magazine of some suave, 007 (but pre Bond) type dude wearing what, I think, would be called a smoking jacket, and asked if she would make me one, and she did. And it was nice. A shiny plaid fabric with shiny solid lapels, cuffs, pockets and belt. I guess I felt suave and debonair when I put it on. I don't remember what Dad, Bill and Harry said or what they thought. I still don't want to know. What I probably would have thought and

probably would have said if it had been one of them lounging around in that thing; “what the heck is that? Where are you going to wear that, to a dog fight? I wouldn’t be caught dead in that!” But if they heckled me, I don’t remember it. They must haven’t. I usually remember heckling. I don’t know how I thought I was going to project my real man image outside the walls of our house. Maybe if I had worn it over to Nancy Wait’s house when I took her a Johnny Mathis record for Christmas ’59 when we were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade that she would have dumped Robbie Miller, a year older and at East High while we were still at McClintock Jr Hi, and though I took her to a Globe Trotter’s game at the old Charlotte Coliseum, how’s that for suave, and though she went to the Sweet Heart dance with me that spring, she’s been Mrs. Robbie Miller for over 50 years. Apparently smoking jackets don’t make the man.

One of the best Christmas presents I ever got was in 1964, my freshman year in college and Bill’s first, and only year since he was drafted the next, working for Chatham Mfg in Elkin, which made woolen goods, primarily blankets. They also made wool pull over jackets and Bill got me a red one with black trim, Davidson’s colors. I loved it as did my schoolmates. I don’t know what happened to it. If I still had it, I would try to lose enough weight to be able to wear it. The next Christmas, Bill came home on leave from the Army and, as I still had a week or more of college vacation left, rode back to spend a few days with him to see what Army life was like, as I would be facing it in a couple of years since I was in Army ROTC, to Ft McClelland, which I think is now closed, so they won’t have to remove its Confederate general’s name, in Anniston, Ala, the then home of the Chemical Corp, in which he was a Lt. I don’t remember what kind of car he had, but the engine over heating light came on about Mt Holly, so we turned around and headed back to Rama Rd. I don’t remember if we had to stop along the way to add water. We left it, which needed a new water pump, and took off again in Mom’s Mercury Meteor. I think Bill was living in the BOQ, bachelor’s officers’ quarters, so I got a little taste of a Lt’s life. While Bill was on duty and on the bus ride back to Charlotte, I read *Catcher in the Rye*, not appreciating it nearly as much as when I reread it years later.

I think I gave Janet my fraternity pin at Christmas ’66, along with what I thought was a beautiful ski sweater. Our tastes then, as today, differ somewhat. I don’t remember seeing her wear it but once or twice. Sweaters must have been in. She gave me a blue v-neck that I still have today. Very durable. A year later, she gave me the best Christmas present ever, Tommy. We were renting a little house just north of Davidson and her MD was in Mooresville where we had gotten her preadmitted to the hospital. Not long after we had gotten up that Sunday morning Christmas Eve, Janet said she thought we’d better get ready to go to the hospital and within short order we were on the way. When we got up to the maternity ward, there were several mothers whose bundles of Christmas joy had already arrived and they were in the process of checking out. So, by early afternoon, we were the only expectants in the lonely stable. In those days, fathers in waiting were not asked, expected or even allowed to help with breathing or to mop a moist brow, nor to be present to participate in or even witness the birth of his child. His only function was to stay out of the way, so this dad, like most American males, spent the afternoon watching the NFL playoffs in the waiting room, alone. Tommy arrived around 7:00 pm. He and his Mommy were fine. He’ll celebrate his 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday this Christmas Eve. That Christmas afternoon, expecting mothers began coming in to the maternity ward. Janet was the only mother to have her baby on Christmas Eve evening in the Mooresville Hospital inn.

And Janet gave me another present that Christmas. She had gotten Mac to get me a pair of golf shoes at the PX at Little Creek, the small Navy base near where he and Mary lived in Virginia Beach. They brought them when they came down a day or so after Christmas to help me bring mother and son home. Made from a synthetic leather that was so durable that those shoes probably still exist today in some form but which made them impossible to break in, I only wore them a few times because they killed my feet. Well, it was the thought that counted, and besides, she had already given me the best Christmas present a man can have, his first born, who holds the best present trophy until his second is born, and then his best present trophy goes up on the family's mantel with the first. There were just two trophies on Janet and my mantel for 32 years, and then we added trophies for step-grands Phoenix and Tai, and 4 years later, one for grandson Sam, and 4 after his, one for Emma and a month later, one for Sophie, and 2 years later, one for Anna, our three beautiful and talented granddaughters, and 3 years ago, one for Ava and a little over a year ago, one for Zeke Combs, our step-great grands, Phoenix and Jarrod's bundles of energy and joy. Now that's a sparkling mantel of best present trophies, the best Christmas decorations a family can have. We're grateful for and love them all.

I'm not positive, but I think we celebrated Tommy's first birthday and the next Christmas with Mac and Mary in Virginia Beach. I don't remember what he got for his first birthday and second Christmas, but I'm sure Mary and Mac lavished presents on their first grandchild, especially Mac, for whom Christmas was special. Mac had, and I expect Janet still has, a little bear that plays a drum when you wind him up, which made The Little Drummer Boy his favorite Christmas song. I'm not sure but I think he bought it in Japan. What I do remember are his stories about rounding up presents for the kids in Japan where he spent his first Christmas away from his own children during the year he was stationed there, around 1955 (though he fought the Japanese in WWII, unlike many South Pacific vets, he loved the Japanese people and talked about their humility and graciousness [of course, he didn't witness firsthand the brutality of their soldiers that many on the ground had]) and for the Vietnamese children when he spent his second Christmas away from his family during the year he was a helicopter squadron commander in Viet Nam. The Marines' Toys for Tots was his favorite charity. I took his little '04 Mercedes station wagon which Janet inherited when he died to the Mercedes dealer a few weeks ago to get an ignition problem fixed and when I was paying the bill, I noticed there were scores of new childrens' bicycles lined up against the wall and I asked the cashier about them and was told they had been purchased by their employees to give to Toys for Tots. I added all the cash I had in my wallet to their cause in memory of Mac. Janet donates to Tots every Christmas.

Mac was going to get me a blue dress shirt that Christmas but neither the Norfolk nor Little Creek PX had my size. Military pilots have to fly so many hours to keep their flying credentials, so Mac called Quantico to see if their PX had my size and secured a plane and flew up to get it. I would loved to have flown with Mac but regulations prevented a civilian from flying with him, just as they prevented Mary from going up in a spaceship with him (in his last year or so, Mac told some fanciful stories, one being that Mary was in a moon bound rocket with him at Cape Canaveral and just before lift-off, they made her get off, so he had to make the flight alone). But probably the most memorable thing about that Christmas was that the morning we were leave and drive back to Chapel Hill, I was so sick with the flu I couldn't get out of bed. It's the sickest I've ever been in my life. And Mac was just as sick. He and I were



literally crawling to the bathroom, too sick to stand up. Fortunately, nobody else got it. It was several days before I could travel and though I still wasn't 100%, I had to get back for exams for my first semester of law school. Mac, like his daughter, is a medical sleuth, determined to find out who made us sick. And he was sure it was Harv Jensen, one of his contemporaries, who, he remembered, had come into a meeting a day or so before with a cough. HARV JENSEN, a name which shall forever live in infamy in the Mac Tweed family annals! If, God forbid, Janet gets Covid, rest assured she will trace it to the culprit who gave it to her, and please God, don't let it be me!

The next 15 Christmases are kind of a blur. If I remember correctly, we spent the next Christmas in Virginia Beach and I returned to Chapel Hill and left Janet and Tommy with Mac and Mary and they drove with them to Newport, RI where, the Colonel's leadership qualities having been recognized by the Marine Corps, he was sent to the Naval War College. Janet remembers that Tommy looked out the window in the quaint New England house which served as the Tweeds' quarters for the next year and pointed to the moon and said "ball". Mary taught him to say "moon". Uncle Doug gave him a blow up punching dummy that he loved to swat down and laugh when it popped back up. That was a Christmas of firsts for Tommy; his first big road trip, first time north of the Mason-Dixon line, first, and, I think, only drive across the George Washington Bridge, and his first plane ride when he and Janet flew to Charlotte where I, still on Christmas break and visiting Mom and Dad, picked them up at the airport.

After Mac and Mary moved from Newport to Nashville for him to begin his 3 year stint as the commander of the Naval ROTC unit at Vanderbilt, the first Marine to serve in that capacity, followed by his retirement from the military and his 10 years as director of security at Vandy, I think we spent the next couple of Christmases with my folks in Charlotte while I finished law school, and then in Monroe, where we moved in August, '71. Our photo scrapbooks are in Penland as I write this from Louisville, so I can't consult them but we have pictures of Tommy blowing out the candles on his 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday cake which Memaw (see below) made in the shape of a puppy, on Rama Rd. I remember Janet and I strolling him while Christmas shopping through the Charlottetown Mall and seeing a girl named Jean Stephens from Matthews approaching us. Our eyes caught but neither of us stopped or spoke. I hadn't seen her since the fall of '66 when, after Bill Carr (she was in our high school class but I didn't know her) had fixed me up with and I dated her all that summer and, after returning to school and seeing Janet, who was dating a fraternity brother, set up by Judy Davis, Janet's roommate at UNCG and the girlfriend of another fraternity brother, Jimmy McMillan, who had fixed me up on a blind date with Janet that spring and who I had corresponded with that summer, she, Jean Stephens that is, threw my picture, which she had requested when we were dating, at me when I told her I wasn't going to date her anymore because I wanted to resume my relationship with Janet. I never saw Jean again. Whew, thank goodness she didn't attend our 50<sup>th</sup> East Meck reunion which Janet accompanied me to.

Well, back to Christmas. We spent Tim's first Christmas, '72, in Nashville. We have pictures of him on a quilt on the floor in front of the fireplace in Grandfather and Grandmother's (as the boys called Mac and Mary; they called Louise and Joe Memaw and Pawpaw, nicknames started by Janet, and I Bill and Sylvia's Will and Ruth and Harry and Kate's Alexandra, David and Meredith followed suit) with Tommy, obvious, from the ball he's wanting his almost 9 month old brother to catch and from the excited look on his face, anxiousness for his little brother to be his buddy and playmate, a relationship which it was

their parents' joy, with mixed gratitude and relief, to watch develop over the ensuing years. I don't know two siblings who, respect, love, and enjoy each other's company more, a gift to this Dad that just keeps on giving!

After we moved to Monroe, Mac and Mary always came before or, after Doug and Christy's Jennifer and Jessica were born, on Christmas day, after helping them open their presents in Kingsport on Christmas morning. Mac always knew what little fellows wanted: Goo Goo Bars, peanuts covered with chocolate, not bars but hockey puck shaped, invented and made in Nashville. Those were the first presents Santa took out of his 1968 white Mercedes sleigh, but of course that wasn't all; footballs, basketballs, baseballs, bats and gloves and more. And, of course, each Christmas brought the added opportunity for celebration, Tommy's birthday. Usually we would have Mom and Dad down for his birthday, but we have a picture when Mom invited us all up to their house. I'm not looking at the picture, but I can see it in my mind's eye: gathered around the maple table with the delicious looking birthday cake Mom had made for her first grandchild, with candles lit and plates, forks and napkins at the ready, the same table now sitting in the dining room of our presently sparsely furnished old( built in 1925) new house in Louisville, were Mac, wearing a tie, and Mary, Dad, also wearing a tie(I guess the grandfathers were feeling especially patriarchal on the occasion) and Mom, appropriately with her apron on, Aunt Edna, Mom's older and favorite sister from St Petersburg, Bill, Sylvia and Will (I don't think Ruth had come along yet), Harry, who wasn't married yet, and Janet, Tim, birthday boy, Tommy and me. I don't know who made the picture-maybe Bill had brought his tripod, but we're all there. Our whole family, except for Doug and his family. It's one of my favorite photos. Wouldn't it be nice to have them all together again!

And as for Doug's crew, they visited us one Christmas in Monroe. Mac and Mary were there, either from Nashville or after they'd moved back to their house in Va Beach, which they rented for the 14 years they were gone. I don't know where everybody slept. Mac and Mary probably spent the night with his brother Dan and his wife, Vera in Mint Hill. Jennifer must have been 6 or 7 and Jessica, is she 2 years younger? We have lots of pictures. I think Tommy and Tim enjoyed being looked up to, literally and figuratively, as older cousins. You can see the admiration, almost like a bobbysoxer looking up at Elvis, in Jessica's face as she looked up at Tim, sort of the way Susan Demart, the cute little daughter of Herb and Cam did when she was 6 or 7 and Tim was 5 or 6 years older after he befriended her on a camping trip 40-50 of us from 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist in Monroe went on to raft the Nantahala River one summer. Jessica was the champ at Husker Do, a game where memory is critical, and wanted to play it over and over. But the boys weren't used to such female attention, even if it was from young cousins. Fortunately, it was the warmest Christmas any of us could remember and Mac had gotten them a new basketball, and Uncle Doug loved to play, too, so bball in shorts and T-shirts in the backyard was their escape from Husker Do. Even Mary got in on it, showing her 4 grands how she sank free throws in high school.

This may be a good time to talk about food, for what is Christmas without goodies; a little more egg nog and figgie pudding, please. Mary always made and brought a cheese ball, the best I've ever eaten. And Tommy's favorite was Janet's chicken divan, with rice and mandarin orange salad, his birthday dinner request for years. YUM, I can taste it now! In later years, he graduated to standing ribs, which Janet roasted to perfection. And always, coconut custard pie for dessert. And a week later, on New Year's Eve,

oyster stew, one of Mac's, Dad's, Tommy's and my favorites. Tommy came to visit me on Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving this year after he had assisted the Native Americans with their sweat lodge at the federal prison where he's been a chaplain for 19 years and spent the night. For the first time in my life, with Janet's phone assistance, I made oyster stew. If I do say so myself, I've never eaten better. Tommy loved it, too. I made enough to give two neighbors a small cup. My good friend, Andy Boggs, before he died 10 years ago from a brain tumor, used to make nutty fingers every Christmas to give to friends. I might start a tradition of giving oyster stew to our neighbors here in the Highlands in Louisville, or, post Covid, just inviting them over for a cup. Christmas is many things, and an important part is traditions remembered, continued, and passed along. But Frank Constanza's (Seinfeld) intended tradition, Festivus, for the Rest of Us, didn't catch on, thank goodness.

I also associate Christmas with the game of hearts. I'm not sure where or when I learned to play. Growing up, we played Crazy 8's at home and Canasta across the street at the Freeland's. I never learned to play bridge. In college, there were 2 or 3 card tables at the Phi Gam house and guys would rush down there to get in a bridge game and would bolt down their supper to get back to the bridge table. I didn't need that addiction. Mac loved hearts and when the boys were young and before Doug was married, Mac, Doug, Janet and I would play spirited games, and when the boys were old enough to play, the games got even more spirited, or more accurately, competitive. Mac loved to shoot the moon and if he didn't have a good moon launching hand, he started "tugging on the queen", that is leading with a spade so the holder of the Queen thereof, 13 bad points to whoever takes it, would have to "eat it." He didn't spare anyone, even his favorite son-in-law, daughter or his grandsons. Even now, I can see the concentration on his face as he's counting the cards that have been played in his mind, the sly grin as we're saying, "watch out, I think Grandfather's trying to shoot the moon", and always, whether his moon shot landed on the lunar surface or crashed and burned, the sheer joy and enthusiasm he exuded, simply being surrounded by his family.

One Christmas that vividly stands out in my memory is 1983, the year Tommy turned 16. I had thought up until then that no kid needed a car of his own when he turned 16, but the closer Tommy's 16<sup>th</sup> approached, the more I realized what a convenience for him and Janet if he had one, as without one he would be constantly borrowing hers to go to baseball practice, church youth group, summer jobs, etc. So, we made the decision to surprise him with a car for Christmas. But what kind? Mac had gotten a VW bug for Janet and Doug to share in high school. My first car, at 20, was a 4 cylinder Volvo, not much bigger than the bug. A small car is economical both to buy and operate, and they can't haul too many around in one. But, the smaller the car, the greater the danger to the driver and other occupants in a collision with another vehicle, deer or telephone pole. I don't remember how I found out, but our CPA, Lee Potter's mother had recently died and he was selling her car. I can't imagine an old lady driving a Plymouth Grand Fury, maybe for the same safety reasons I was thinking about for a 16 year old, but an olive drab 4 door? If a machine gun turret had been mounted on the roof, Lee could have gotten more for it from the Army than he did from me. The perfect car for Tommy, completely uncool, not that he didn't want to be cool at that age, but the less cool, maybe the less others would want to ride in it, and plenty big. Only later did I realize what a huge engine it had, a real gas guzzler. And only much later, like after the boys were fully grown, did they tell me how fast that sucker would go.

I picked the behemoth up at Lee's house late afternoon on Christmas Eve and parked it on Tina Circle, a few blocks from our house. Mac and Mary drove in about suppertime. I don't remember whether we'd told Mac about the car and that it was to be a surprise before they got there or not, but when he found out, he was more excited than anybody. He just had to see it, so I told him we'd go over and let him take a look after everybody had gone to bed. I think he and I both pretended going to bed when Tommy and everyone else did, and then we got up and got dressed and drove over to see it. It was bitterly cold, below 20. We had a flashlight and Mac wanted to see under the hood'. Why, was then and still is, beyond my ability to comprehend! Looking at an engine, in the dark, in frigid temperatures? Come on, Colonel, you've got to be kidding, aren't you? No, he wasn't. I don't remember if it was locked but it probably was, being new, to us anyway, and all, so I expect the lock was half frozen. And the weather stripping around the door was probably partially frozen to the steel door, much like a tongue to a pole. But I got in, found the hood latch, pulled it, and the cable snapped. Dang, or similar words and worse thoughts, kind of like, also from A Christmas Story, emanated from Ralphie's old man when the furnace blew up in his face. Mac was a little crestfallen and very apologetic. It really wasn't that big a deal to me. I didn't then and still don't spend much time under a car hood. I don't remember who or what it cost to get it fixed, but I'm sure it was less than the \$75 it cost to replace the plastic pull Tim broke a month or so ago trying to get the hood opened on Mac's '04 Mercedes wagon mentioned hereinabove (and some of you have probably wondered if I ever knew, or if I did, if I still remember and know how to use any legalese for the sake of clarity, brevity and simplicity in writing good prose; well, now you know).

I got up early Christmas morning and walked over, unthawed Fury and eased her down the driveway, stopping at the end of the house rather than pulling her around back where she could be seen from the kitchen window. We all gathered round the tree and started opening presents. It seems like Tim raked in a pretty good haul. I don't remember what Tommy got, probably clothes, and when all the presents were opened and oohed and aahed over, and gratitudes expressed, I asked Tommy, who didn't have much to ooh and aah over, what was in the little box behind the tree. He had a quizzical look on his face when he opened it and pulled out a set of keys and I suggested he go take a look in the driveway. We all followed him out and when he saw that hunk of Army olive drab steel with a red bow tied to its radio antenna, he wasn't quite sure how to react. His face turned from shock to a smile, which grew bigger and bigger as he sat down in the front seat and cranked it up. Later that morning, I rode with him on his maiden voyage, down Sunset Dr to the Food Lion to get something, and someone we knew, it may have been Amy Baucom, his high and Sunday school classmate, saw us. I don't remember the tone of his voice or her look or other reaction when he told her he was driving his birthday and Christmas present. Remembering Amy, I'm sure she was all smiles. It was my most memorable Christmas in 16 years and probably Tommy's, too.

Dad and Mom and Mac and Mary usually gave us money for Christmas and it sure came in handy. I didn't make and couldn't save much even after practicing law for several years. We bought the house on Martha Dr in 1972, a year after we moved to Monroe for \$45,000. Each of our folks loaned us \$2500 (which we repaid within a couple of years) and we borrowed \$40,000 on a 25 year loan with \$279/month payments. We weren't required to pay into escrow monthly for taxes and insurance, so before the end of each year, we had to come up with the money to pay the city and county taxes.

Several years later, Steddy and Martha Parris and Janet and I bought a 100 acre farm on Stack Rd, for \$100,000 and borrowed all the money on a 7 year loan with annual payments. The first few years we sold enough of the land to make the loan payment and then we refinanced the \$75,000 balance for 25 years with monthly payments of almost \$600. Again, no tax escrow and, of course, the taxes had to be paid on the land at the end of the year. Between house and land payments (thank goodness we didn't have any other debt) and the costs of living, if it had not been for those cash gifts at Christmas, we would really have been strapped.

I don't remember the details of Christmas of '88 but I'm sure it wasn't Christmas as usual on Rama Rd because Mom and Dad were getting ready to move to Plantation Estates in January to begin a new chapter in their lives. 1989 turned out to be a year of transition and sadness. Tommy began his last year at Carolina and Tim at Monroe. Hurricane Hugo hit in September. Dad died in early December. Two days after his funeral, the senior minister at First Baptist Church in Monroe where we were members called me at the office to say he needed to see me urgently. It was to seek my advice on how he should proceed after receiving some disturbing news about the personal life of our minister of music who was to lead the choir, which I sang in, in a performance of the Christmas portion of Handel's Messiah at the 11:00 worship service on the coming Sunday morning. I was elected to tell the choir at a dress rehearsal on Saturday about what had been discovered and that our organist, Eve Dysart Buchanan (ironically, if I'm not mistaken, Bill knew Eve when they both worked at Celanese and Harry knew her as the organist or choir director or maybe just, like him, a paid choir member at Trinity Presbyterian), would lead the rehearsal and play and direct the performance on Sunday. I don't remember how it went, but I've sung in the chorus performing the Messiah several times, all in much more joyful circumstances. The whole episode and Dad's death left a pall over Christmas, Mom's first of 16 or 17 more as a widow.

Tommy, whose primary enjoyment of classical music had been limited to Elmer Fudd's operatic rendition of "Kill the Wabbit" or the bull sharpening his horns to The Barber of Seville before going after Bugs, the matador, after he discovered that all the words in the Messiah are scriptural, has become a big fan of the Messiah. Easter he texted me his rousing acapella version of The Trumpet Shall Sound. Christmas before last, he drove over to Louisville from Frankfort to sing in a sing-a-long of the Christmas portion with me. I gave him a cd of it and he sings along with it on his way to work. The key to singing the choruses of the Messiah, as with most choral singing, is to stand beside someone who knows the music or at least can read it and has a good ear. Bill Carr, a pretty good bass and trumpeter, kept me reasonably in tune in youth and adult choirs at Matthews Baptist and he and Mike Pittard, an excellent bass and pretty good basketballer, did the one year I sang in the choir my junior year in high school (scheduling conflicts kept me from being in it my senior year when I could have been in it with Harry, a sophomore), where the terrific director, Charlie Starnes, introduced me to some great choral music, including the choruses And the Glory of the Lord, Glory to God and the most famous, the Hallelujah, from the Messiah. Brooks Griffin, who didn't distinguish a pianissimo from a forte but, having played the trombone in high school and at Carolina shortly after Kay Kyser played there and had become a popular Swing band leader, had a great ear and was an excellent reader of music and lead the bass section in the choir at 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist in Monroe with his foghorn voice, and we all followed wherever Brooks led. My ear may not be tin, but it sure isn't platinum. Growing up and singing in the shower, I don't

know how many times I heard Harry yell, "Tom, you're flat". I guess I needed a good baritone, maybe Mom's favorite, Nelson Eddy, to shower with, on water proof ear buds, that is.

Speaking of Bill Carr and music, while, as youngsters, the boys usually went to bed at a reasonable hour in order to be up early on Christmas and Janet wasn't far behind them since she was going to be as busy as an Elf the next day, I used to like to stay up on Christmas Eve to watch and hear the music at midnight services on tv. Bill has been my close friend since 4<sup>th</sup> grade when his dad came to be pastor at Matthews Baptist. We graduated from high school together where he was senior class president and I was veep, were fraternity brothers and graduated from Davidson together where he transferred after two years at Mars Hill, started law school together, after the first year of which, when he decided the law wasn't his calling, fulfilled his Army ROTC commitment by going to Vietnam in the Medical Corps and then became an ordained Presbyterian minister after attending Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Ga. We were best men at each other's weddings. His first job was as an associate pastor in Arkansas and then he became senior minister at a church in Rock Hill. Busy as young professionals, husbands and fathers, we kind of lost touch during those years. I'm watching the Christmas Eve service at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta on the Turner network, which our tv was frequently tuned to since it broadcast the Atlanta Braves, who Tommy and Tim lived and died with. A robed and bearded minister is leading the choirs' procession down the aisle and when it's complete, he comes to the lectern to lead the call to worship, and I rubbed my eyes and squinted and, I think, proclaimed out loud something like "my God, that looks like Bill Carr" and it was. From Matthews to Peachtree, quite a journey. For me, from Rama to Monroe, a straight shot, after veering thru Davidson and Chapel Hill, down the Seaboard, I guess it's the CSX now, railroad.

I don't remember, but after Tommy, and then Tim, moved to Louisville, I guess that they came home or maybe, once or twice, met us at Mac and Mary's after they built their house across from Doug in Kingsport. Tommy, though not yet ordained, married Tim and Sara the second time (they had gotten hitched legally a few days before by Brian Cason, a seminary friend of Tommy who was ordained and pastor of Manley Memorial Baptist in the Portland community in Louisville, where all three also lived before Tim flew the bachelor coop) at Sunset Beach where we were also celebrating Mac's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in Sept, 2000. I think Janet and I spent that Christmas in Louisville where Tim, Sara, Phoenix and Tai were living just off Frankfort Ave. The next December, Tim, though not a man of the cloth, who, in fact, had to buy some new cloth in the form of a suit for the occasion, participated (his most memorable role was catching the upended candelabra before the lit candles could end the ceremony in conflagration) with two men of the cloth, in marrying Tommy and Kim. Sam attended in utero with Sara, a bridesmaid. I don't remember whether Janet and I came back to Kentucky for Christmas.

I think the next Christmas, Tommy and Kim were renting a house in Lexington near the federal pen where he had recently begun as a chaplain and Tim and crew came over Christmas Eve for Tommy's birthday and Phoenix stayed over and she and Janet and I spent the night with Kim and Tommy. I think there was some snow on the ground Christmas morning. I had brought the old violin which I still had (Larry Harrington knew the man out Wolf Pond Rd who made it [I've forgotten his name] and he loaned it to me, and told me to keep it as long as I wanted, and I did. Several years ago, I was in Food Lion on Sunset Dr in early summer, longing for a vine ripened tomato, which of course they didn't have. I asked

the produce guy if he knew anybody who would have any yet and he told me about a guy that lived off Wolf Pond Rd that probably would, so I found him, and sure enough, he did, delicious ones. He gave me half a dozen and wouldn't take a cent. His name was the same as the violin maker, whose house I had been to previously to return the violin, where the occupant told me that he and his wife had died. I asked the tomato man about the violin man and it turned out they were brothers. I brought him the violin. I don't remember if violin man had children but tomato man was glad to have it back in the family. He should have kicked my fanny for keeping it for so long, but instead, he gave me more tomatoes, some squash, cucumbers, cantaloupe and a watermelon. If other Food Lion shoppers had known about him, their produce man might have lost his job) from when the boys, with my strong encouragement and participation took Suzuki violin lessons from Sarah Slechta, who, with her husband Joe, both previous members of the Charlotte symphony, often played in a small orchestral group which Jim Reich, the predecessor of our minister of music mentioned hereinabove (get to use that legalese again) would occasionally arrange to accompany our choir on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter performances of the respective sections of the Messiah. We have a photo of me playing carols on that fiddle at Christmas at Mom and Dad's while everyone, though I think Dad, with hymn raised and mouth open in song, is the only other one who can be seen in the picture. I was hoping Phoenix might get interested in the violin. We listened to a cd of the Messiah, with, I feel sure, me pointing out the violins' sound, as we drove from Frankfort to Louisville on Christmas morning. Phoenix took up dance.

It may have been the next Christmas that we brought Mom with us to Kentucky. We spent a night or two at the new small brick house in a new neighborhood also near Tommy's pen which he and Kim had recently bought. That may have been the only Christmas they lived there because rather than it being the quiet and safe neighborhood they had assumed it was, it was loud from people, dogs and traffic. Tim and Sara had bought a small house on Vinedale, not far from the hospital where Sam was born and where, 17 years later, his nephew Zeke was born. I'm not sure, but Ava may have been born there, too. I don't know how, but Mom, Janet and I all stayed in their little house. Mom played carols on their electronic keyboard and we all sang carols. One Christmas on Vinedale, when Sam was 2 or 3, maybe 3 going on 4 in March, Sam wanted a fire truck or maybe it was a tractor trailer, and when he saw that Santa had brought it Christmas morning, all he could say was "man oh man, man oh man, man oh man"! I've never seen a more excited kid.

When Tommy was 2 or 3, either we or Mac and Mary got him a rocking horse suspended from his metal corral by springs. He loved that horse and got to where he would bounce him so hard we were afraid if he flew off he'd hit the ceiling. Man oh man, could he make that stallion gallop. I don't remember Tim being such a buckaroo. I think we saved him and Sam inherited him one Christmas, but maybe I'm wrong and Tommy's steed had gone to the graveyard in the sky so Sam got his own bronco.

I'm typing this on December 19; Sophie will be 15 tomorrow! She was our Christmas gift in 2005 when she came home wrapped in swaddling clothes to the house on Forest Hills Dr in Monroe which Janet and I couldn't sell after we moved to the house we'd built on the farm on Stack Rd, so Tim and Sara moved down from Louisville and Sophie was born a Tar Heel. Mac and Mary gave Sam a train for Christmas. I remember Mac down on the floor in our new living room before the gas log fire in the fireplace (Janet had gotten tired of smelling smoke from the Yule and other logs we burned in Buck Stove fireplace

inserts on Martha and Forest Hills Drives), putting it together with him. When Tim and Sara moved back to Louisville after one year in Monroe and Tim took the job as headknocker, oops, master at Eastside Christian Academy housed in New Life Church, as part of his compensation, the church let them move into a house which it owned beside the church. It had an upstairs and a basement and the basement stairs were extremely steep. When Janet and I visited that Christmas, one year old Sophie was scampering up and down those stairs so fast she scared us to death, and she hasn't stopped since. When they bought a house and moved a few blocks away, Tim and Sara built a sandbox in the backyard with a platform above, which was reach by a steep ladder attached to an adjacent tree. Sophie would fly up that ladder while we held our breath. Now, I breathe a little easier since she's on the ground helping hold up the pyramid of girls on her cheerleading team, and not a "flyer", whose grandparents I'm sure are holding their breath every time she's launched.

Harry and Kate and Alexandra, David and Meredith came down to visit Mom at Plantation Estates between Christmas and New Years most, if not every year after Dad died and Kate, an excellent soprano who met Harry in a singing group in or near D.C., where Harry was working with the Federal Highway Administration and Kate was teaching (right, Kate?) and Harry began singing a few numbers for Mom and some of her friends. The word spread, mostly by Mom, and the audience grew and their kids joined the performance as their talents matured and within a few years, the Caldwell concert had become an annual affair, as the audience grew, year after year, in the small auditorium, as the price of admission was just hearing about it, mainly through Mom, its chief promoter and publicist. Harry will have to recount the history of how it grew from his family of performers to include the Caldwell brothers trio and then quartet with the addition of Jackie Gill, a great guy and friend of our family who had been the minister of music at Matthews during our teen years, and a terrific tenor who some might remember sang The Holy City, one of Dad's, and Mom's, favorites and the Lord's Prayer at his funeral. Jackie's whole family was musical. His brother Bill preceded him as choir director at Matthews. Jack was a child prodigy, singing gospel music on the radio before he was 10. He grew up near and was a friend and contemporary of my half brother, Joe. Joyce, Jackie's widow, invited me to sing in the choir at his funeral at Shiloh Baptist in Union Co. After Bill. Harry and I discovered Joe 7 or 8 years ago, Joyce told me that Jackie's Dad had led the music at the Methodist church, I can't think of its name, New Hope, maybe, on Plyler Mill Rd near Joe's house and that Joe's adoptive father, Sam Aycok, played the organ.

Several years ago, I learned that my Davidson classmate, Steve Lee, originally from Shelby and now a retired Methodist minister living in Davidson, himself a terrific organist, had served New Hope, if that's its name, and another, smaller church in his charge (is that the correct term, Steve?), Trinity, located on Trinity Church Rd, just off Wolf Pond, almost to the SC line. I didn't know Steve in college but got to know him through conference calls we held when beginning what became DavidsonServes, an alumni service initiative. When he found out we lived in Union Co, he told me of his pastorate at New Hope and I told him of recently learning about Joe, who was one of his parishoners. I visited and sat beside Steve at a subsequent homecoming service at New Hope. Joe and/or his wife Lillian were sick and unable to attend but Pat Schlappish (Tommy knows him as the moose who caught his pitches on the high school baseball team) his wife and children and dad and mom, all New Hope members, were there. Steve retired to Davidson for several reasons I'm sure, but not the least of which is because he's an avid



Wildcat basketball fan. He met Nancy Rorie a court reporter who I knew well, and her husband David, who I know, but not as well, at Trinity, where they were members, Nancy having grown up there as a Gullidge (her mother, Sarah, a die-hard Democrat, as was Nancy, a long time chair of the Union Co Democratic Party, was the long time head of the Union Co Bd of Elections). David worked at Acme Nameplate and was roped into a group of 3 or 4 by Bill Geer, an Ohioan who was pretty high up in Acme and was a huge sports fan (he once challenged me to name the 3 sports heroes from the town he grew up in, and with a few hints, I got all 3: Lou Groza , football; Bill Mazoroski, baseball; and John, Hondo, Havlichek, basketball) who became Davidson basketball fanatics. They had courtside season tickets and attended all of the home games and away games within driving distance on weekends, and most, if not all the holiday tournaments Davidson played in, even going to Hawaii, and, of course, the conference tournaments, wherever they were. I usually saw them at the games when Tim was playing. They're on a first name basis with the coach, Bob McKillop. I know that one member, Bill Curlee, comptroller of Acme, who I would get an update on Davidson recruiting prospects from at the barbershop, died several years ago but I wouldn't be surprised if David and maybe Geer and some others still go to games. I don't know whether David got Steve interested in Davidson bball or merely stoked his interest that probably goes all the way back to when the Cats reached #1 and made the Sports Illustrated cover during the '64-5 season, our freshman year, only to become another victim of the SI jinx, getting beat in their next game. In any event, Steve is still a major fan. At our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion a few years ago, he took me on a tour of the addition to the gym which added several practice courts and told me that he planned to leave \$ in his will so they can add a film room (did I get that right, Steve?). Also, at our 50<sup>th</sup>, Steve played the organ in Lingle Chapel during the service where we recognized our deceased classmates.

Returning to Christmas, several years ago Steve alerted me to a sing-a-long Messiah with orchestra and college soloists in the Duke performance hall, built onto and as a part of the conversion of old Johnson Gym, where we watched Wildcat basketball, to the current student union after the Belks put their name on another Davidson building, Belk Arena where Tim and the current Cats and Kittens play. I asked him whether he sang tenor or bass and he said either, so he saved me a seat in the bass section and I drove up and sang beside him. Though an outstanding musician, Steve is soft spoken and, unlike Brooks, he usually sings piano, even in the forte passages, so I had to tone down myself and listen closely. Steve alerted me by email a few months ago to Nancy Rorie's death. He preached her funeral at Trinity.

Well, where was I when I took that detour through Union Co and Davidson. Oh, yes, music at Plantation Estates. How to say this politely? Mom, for all her admirable qualities, had a little streak of pride, but who doesn't; most all of us like to be, in her phrase, "made over". One of the hi-lites of her 17 years at Plantation Estates was becoming the impresario of the after Christmas concerts, which continued to grow, both in concert goers and performers, which she promoted and delighted in. If it had been up to her, it would have had to have been moved to one of the big churches in the area or some other venue large enough to accommodate scores of performers and hundreds in the audience. I brought my good friend, Andy Boggs, a pretty strong tenor, and my law partner, David Lee, who later learned the violin with his daughter, morphing into a country/bluegrass fiddler, a good baritone (Mom invited David's mother to attend and I think she did a time or two) from Monroe, and Bill brought Lowell Dotson, the former minister of music and a baritone on par with Jackie Gill's tenor, and several others from the choir

at Providence Baptist, where Bill has sung in the choir, taught, for decades and may still teach, 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys (right, Bill?) Sunday School for decades, served on the Deacon Board numerous and as chairman, several, times, on the last Pastor Search Committee and probably previous ministerial search committees, and originated, probably over 20 years ago, and still leads an early Thursday morning men's Bible study at the church, which is followed by biscuits (I think they introduced the concept "extra brown" biscuits to the menu) and coffee at the nearby Bojangles; so dependent is that group on Bill, that when he and Harry flew down to spend a few days with me camping in Fla two winters ago, the guy who was to lead in Bill's absence called him on Wednesday night about something for the next morning, maybe who had the church key.

And the audience grew to include non Plantationers; if I remember correctly, the youngest of Dad's 11 siblings, twins Don and Dot (who, btw, were, like me, born on Dad's birthday, February 27, Dad in 1908, they in 1930, and me in 1946) and their spouses, Jo and Bill came several times as did members of Matthews and Providence Baptist. Mom began recording the event on cassettes. Often when Janet and I visited her in her apartment, she would be listening to the recordings. I don't think anything brought her more joy. I don't know who has those cassettes. Bill, Harry and I need to decide on their disposition. We don't want the grandchildren fighting over them!

When Mom died in 2006, her funeral at Matthews Baptist included a reprise of those Christmas concerts, accompanied on the organ by Rachel Carr Hood as she had at Plantation Estates on the piano (from Mom's estate I sent Rachel a little check in thanks, on which I wrote "good playing"; to her brother, Bill, who spoke at her funeral, as he had Dad's, capturing a very insightful image of her when he told how, when he was complaining about being worn out from some sports tryout that I'd drug him to, she told him "you've got to toughen up, Bill", I also sent a check to help cover his expenses in coming up from Atlanta, on which I wrote "good words"), introduced by brother Bill telling about how Mom loved the Plantation Christmas concerts, kicked off by Harry, Kate and David, if I recall correctly, followed by Bill, Harry and me singing How Great Thou Art, and then joined on the stage by anyone who wanted to lead in singing her favorite hymns. I remember Tommy and Tim joining us, Bill Carr and several others. Andy Boggs and his wife Sue were there, with our good friend Ricky Creech, but I don't think Andy joined us on stage because he had developed spasmodic dysphonia, the same ailment Diane Rhem has that severely weakened his voice between periodic treatments. Reece and Carolyn Moore, long time members of Matthews Baptist and its choir, came to several of the Christmas concerts and were also at Mom's funeral. When Carolyn died a few years later, Reece asked Bill and me to sing at her funeral, but being without Harry, the only real musician of us three (sorry, Bill), we needed some reinforcements, so Bill brought along a few folks from Providence and we got by, barely. Reece, the only one it mattered to, thought it was great.

OK, OK, I'm winding down. It's Monday morning as I'm typing this and Christmas is Friday. I'll conclude with two of our visits to Kentucky in the aforementioned (another good word to ensure brevity and reduce unnecessary wordiness in otherwise long-winded writings, a word that could and should and sometimes, but probably not nearly frequently enough, be used by the non-legal writing laity to more efficiently and effectively convey relatively simple and straight forward thoughts, arguments and musings, making it much easier and thus pleasanter reading for those, whose time is much too valuable

to be wasted with jibber jabber, who may otherwise become erstwhile readers, to remain loyal devotees of those who, for reasons known only to themselves, think they have something worthwhile to say) '04 Mercedes station wagon of Mac's. We drove it one Christmas when we brought Mac up on his third visit to Louisville, his first being when he and Mary drove his Volvo station wagon up for Tommy and Kim's wedding, at which he acted as the family videographer and Bill, who drove Sylvia and Mom up, the photographer, though Kim also had professionals document the occasion. His second visit was when Janet and I picked up Mom at Plantation Estates in our Ford Windstar mini-van, and then Mac and Mary in Kingsport on mothers' day weekend, 2002, and brought them to Louisville to see their, Mac and Mary's second but Mom's first, great grandchild, Sam, born in March, and on return, spending the night, their first and my and Janet's second, at the Homestead in Warm Springs, Va, where Mom said we were "in high cotton", and we were. On this, his third trip to Ky for Christmas (Mary had passed away in early January, just after Christmas, 2007), I had turned over driving duties to Janet when I had begun to get sleepy. Mac was in the front passenger seat and I was sitting behind Janet, semi-conscious. Rain had started to turn into sleet and snow as we approached Lexington on I-75. Traffic was fairly heavy and we were in the most inside lane, nearest the concrete barrier erected because construction was going on in the median, going probably 55 or 60 when the car started skidding toward the barrier, front end first. I was instantly wide awake, maybe yelling as I was sure we were only milliseconds from disaster. Mac, without uttering a sound, grabbed the steering wheel with his left hand and, miraculously, we straightened up in our lane, thank goodness, because there was traffic in the lane right beside us. And thank goodness we had a pilot who had flown in 3 wars riding as co-pilot. The Colonel saved the sleigh, potentially our lives and Christmas! I hate to think what might have happened if we had left him at home.

A night or so later, we went with Sara and Tim et als to a Christmas party at Pam, Sara's mother, and Wayne's, her step dad. Wayne is a huge fan of the military, having served in the Army and being the originator over 30 years ago and still the director and producer of Thunder over Louisville that kicks off Derby week in Louisville in May with a fantastic military air show and major fireworks display. As such, he has met many top government and military brass. He has a framed photo of him and Donald Rumsfeld, when he was Secretary of Defense, in his basement office, along with a large display of photos and models of aircraft performing or which have performed in Thunder, which includes the Blue Angels and other famous groups. That night, Wayne treated Mac as the hero he is. Thank-you, Wayne and Pam.

The second Christmas story involving Mac's Mercedes and my last, story and Mercedes, which we'll retire when gets too expensive to maintain, that is, if I'm not too expensive and too much trouble to maintain before it is, was several years ago when Janet and I were driving up to Tommy and Kim's on Christmas Eve, scheduled to arrive before and provide some of the goodies for Tommy's birthday party. Again, coming up I-75 before hitting Lexington, disaster of a different nature struck; a flat tire. Fortunately, it wasn't a blowout. I could tell from the handling that we had a tire going flat and I eased it over onto the wide emergency lane. Bah, Humbug! But, just an inconvenience; it could have been worse, but it soon became so. I had never changed a tire or even looked in the spare tire compartment of the wagon, a model of German efficiency. Easy enough, I got it jacked up and the spare, one of those

thin ones designed just to get you to a service station, on, only to watch it go flat as I lowered the jack. Double Humbug! What now? We called several nearby tire places (what did we do before cell phones and google?), but it being late afternoon on Christmas Eve, most were either closed or in the process. Finally I got a roadside assistance place that said they had one truck operating but it was on another call and they didn't know when he might be able to get there. I could have used some "Serenity Now", but Janet was far from providing it. I can't remember but probably would exaggerate if I tried to replicate our dialogue at that point. I'm sure it wasn't Ho, Ho, Ho!

What to do? I needed a pump. Where to get one? Where else but from a passing motorist, which are becoming fewer and fewer as most Christmas Eve wayfarers had already arrived at the inn.

\*At this point, I must interrupt the stories of Christmas to give some breaking news: I was typing and stopped right where the story is now, right in the middle of the flat tire saga, for lunch. After lunch, I decided to run a few errands and got in my '04 Toyota Tundra parked in front of the house and started down the street which is a little rough from cracked pavement, to which I attributed the slight but noticeable steering issue, which grew increasingly noticeable as I turned onto the next street. I pulled over. Surprise, surprise, as Gomer would say. A flat driver's side front tire, diametrically opposite of the passenger side rear tire on the Mercedes. I walked back to the house and got the Mercedes wagon out of the garage and drove up to Conn's Auto, a few blocks away on Bardstown Rd, which I had driven and walked by numerous times but had not frequented. The proprietor, David Conn filled up an air tank and I drove back and put enough air in the flat that I could drive my pickup back to Conns. As I was putting the air in, I looked more closely at the tire than I obviously had recently and noticed that it was worn worse than I had assumed it was (unfortunately, I don't pay as much attention to vehicle maintenance as I should, leaving that to the pros when I get them serviced at the dealer regularly-in fact Oxmoor Toyota had replaced the ball joints in the front end and the engine timing chain less than 1,000 miles before and I would have thought they would have noticed and called my attention to my tires, but maybe they thought I choked enough on that \$1600 repair bill, which I had). It took Dave only a glance at the ailing tire and one of the back ones to determine that I needed new tires. I walked home, stopping by Dave Meadow's office, an architect who I had met while walking through my new neighborhood a month or so before, a preferred walk-on punter for Notre Dame in the early 80's, for a 30 minute visit. Delightful guy, as is David Conn, who is reshoeing my truck for Christmas. \*

Back to I-75 on Christmas Eve. I tried flagging down passing vehicles as Janet shouted warnings for me not to get killed. I needed those; otherwise, I might have stepped right out in front of an 18 wheeler! Realizing that if I was to stop a vehicle speeding toward a cup of eggnog at 70mph in order for it to stop anywhere near us, I would need to move further back up the interstate, which I did, to no avail, as Janet's admonishments grew dimmer and dimmer. Then, it hit me. Just waving wasn't doing the trick. They might have thought I was just conveying holiday greetings. I needed to convey our problem. So I bent over and pumped my arms up and down like I was pumping a bicycle pump, and shortly, a guy pulled over in front of us and walked back to the car with one of those magic tire inflators advertised in Sunday newspaper inserts by Northern Hydraulics or Big Lots, and it worked, thank goodness. Ironically, he was on his way home from working on the four laneing of Hiway 19E from I-26 to Spruce Pine near our cabin in Penland. I got his name and the brand of his favorite beer with the intention of finding and

rewarding him in Yancey Co after Christmas, but like with so many of my good intentions, I didn't follow thru. My New Year's resolution will be to do better in that regard!

We drove to the tire dept at the nearby Walmart, getting there just before they closed and getting the cheapest tire they had put on. I think I gave the guy a tip; if I didn't, I certainly should have. I replaced all four tires when we got home after Christmas and was sure to get them to check the spare. We finally got to Tommy and Kim's about 5:00. Don Carmen, Kim's step dad, got the biggest kick out of our story, but whenever I mention it, Kim bends over and mimics my bicycle pumping, and we all get a good laugh out of it, another memory gift that keeps on giving. Thanks, Kim!

Well, this is a good place to stop, ending with my family all laughing together. It's the best present I get every Christmas, though Christmas of 2020 will be a little different for everybody-the Covid Christmas!

I'm finishing this in my recliner at 2246 Rutherford Wynd, Louisville, Ky 40205 (I'm providing this in case any of the readers hereof feel, imbued hereby the spirit of giving at Christmas, to send me Christmas greetings or more) while Janet is in our cabin in Penland. We've decided travel is too risky, so we'll see each other via Facetime, as I'm sure many will this Christmas. I hope my memories rekindle many happy Christmas memories of yours.

MERRY CHRISTMAS and a Happy, hopefully soon Covid-free, New Year,

Tom

12/22/2020

\*\* In the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I walked home with Jimmy Hinkel and Mom was going to pick me up later. Several of us were playing basketball and I got mad about something and told them to "go to hell" and started walking home, a couple of miles away. When Mom came by and they told her I'd started walking home, she asked what I'd said, wanting to know why I'd left, and they just told her that I told them to go to hell. Well, she picked me up walking down Monroe Rd toward Sharon Amity and asked what had happened. I don't remember whether I told her what I'd said or whether she confronted me with and I admitted to my epithet, but when we got home, she washed my mouth out with soap, the first and only time she ever had to do that. I wonder if Ralphie's mother ever had to do wash his out more than once?

