

Silver Bells . . . a memoir by Jessie Eagles Kelly November 19, 2009

“Silver Bells” . . . the music seemed to float about in the air outside of Wellan’s Department store on Third Street in downtown Alexandria, Louisiana. The storefront was decorated with thousands of Christmas lights. In the early 1950’s, trips to Alexandria from Winnfield were few and far between, but to go there during the Christmas holidays was magical. It certainly was “Christmas time in the city!” We did more “window shopping” than shopping but that was just fine with us.

My family took snacks and a thermos of hot coffee on these trips. There were no fast food places and we couldn’t afford to spend money at cafes or truck stops along the way.

Sometimes we would buy fireworks at stands near the city. I don’t recall “shooting” fireworks during the Fourth of July, but we always had them at Christmas. Roman Candles were the best! Fireworks were a visual treat and the sounds of each explosion were different, from “whoosh” to “rat-a-tat-tat,” or the quiet “sputtering” of sparklers.

Going out into the surrounding woods to find a tree was exciting. My mother preferred cedars, but they were not as common as pines. I didn’t like cedars because they were “sticky and prickly!” My younger brother and I would drive into Kisatchie National Forest and then try to find a six-foot tree as near to the road as possible. We knew that the highway department graded the ditches every year, removing the small trees, so that we were only getting these before they did. Nevertheless, we would drop the tree and the hatchet and casually stroll down the road if we heard a vehicle approaching (usually the forestry workers). No one ever stopped, but we truly believed that we could get into trouble if we were caught with “tree in hand!”

Christmas . . . fruitcakes. My mother would buy Mogen David wine to pour over her fruitcakes. I do not know where she bought this as we lived most of our lives in a “dry” parish (county, for anyone living outside of Louisiana). My younger brother and I would sneak into the kitchen and take a small sip of that sweet dark red “forbidden” liquid, adding the equivalent of water back into the bottle so that she wouldn’t notice the level. We only did that twice, so I suppose we didn’t dilute the wine too much. That was the only alcohol allowed in the house (except for wintergreen rubbing alcohol...and no, we weren’t even tempted).

As children we took great delight on Christmas morning in emptying the stocking. It was always filled with an apple, orange, a handful of mixed nuts and that wonderful hard candy (fuzzy from being stuck to the sock). Years later I bought some just to see how it tasted without the fuzz! As far as gifts, I usually asked Santa for only one gift each year. The last one that Santa gave me was a ballerina doll. After that I just felt too grownup to write to Santa, but still left cookies and milk for him on Christmas Eve.

Christmas Eve Gift!...this has been a tradition as long as I can remember. My mother would try to “get” us first. Say it first, early in the morning on Christmas Eve. Later, after we married and moved away, she would call us on the telephone. I taught that to my children and my daughter

delights in calling her aunts, uncles, cousins, brother and me early in the day. The best time I ever had was the Christmas I returned to Louisiana and was living in my sister's home in Dry Prong (she and her husband had moved to Tioga).

It was just daylight at 6 o'clock in the morning, when I heard someone tapping on my bedroom window, calling out "Christmas Eve Gift!". My niece, who had just sent her "menfolk" out to duck hunt, had driven over to "get" me. She was in a gown and overcoat and told me to just put a coat over my pajamas and come with her. We drove to my younger brother's house in Dry Prong and awakened him and his wife. Then we drove to Tioga and awakened my sister and her husband. Later we even stopped at Winn Dixie to pick up extra supplies, dressed like that.

Christmas past, Christmas present, Christmas future. I love to hear my children talk about their childhood Christmas memories, such as the "annual burning of the fingers with the hot wax" night, when the congregation at church held candles, while singing Silent Night. This Christmas I will be with my two children for the first time since 2000. What a joy that will be! Blessings to everyone during this special time of year.