Christmas During the Depression

In December 1936, I was 8 years old and my father has died the year before at Thanksgiving time. For those who know and remember, the Great Depression was in full bloom.

We lived way out in the country in Lincoln County, Miss. It rained a lot that fall and winter. The ditches were filled with water and mud. The unpaved roads were muddy and full of potholes.

Many days we were unable to get to school because of the piercing, bone-chilling cold, rain and mud. To add to that, we did not have proper clothing or shoes for such weather.

It was nearing Christmas and we — the children — looked forward to it with stars in our eyes and dreams of Santa Claus. Mama was anxious. She knew Christmas morning would bring disappointment she could not prevent. There was no money for presents, barely enough to get food to eat — and there wasn't any way to whisper into Santa's ear what her children needed, much less what they wanted and wished for.

She tried to prepare us, saying: "Santa won't be visiting us this year. He can't get to our house. It's too wet and muddy."

Still, she did not dissuade our preparing for Christmas in other ways.

She went with us into the woods searching for just the right Christmas tree — a little cedar. We gathered vines and holly and mistletoe, and from old catalogs we made paper chains with flour paste. Mama cut out paper dolls and snowflakes to hang on the tree. The vines and holly were strung about the room. The mistletoe was put above the doorway.

And Mama prayed and planned how she would pass Christmas Day with her brood of children that would receive no presents.

Christmas Eve finally came. Our expectations were somewhat calmed, but still we hoped that Santa would be able to get to our house. Mama sent us to bed.

Next morning she arose before we got up and made breakfast for us. We had hot biscuits, fried salt pork, molasses and parched cornmeal tea. The reason I can say with absolute certainty what that Christmas breakfast consisted of is because that was our breakfast every day when we were fortunate to have food. Such things as eggs or cereal were practically unheard of, and bacon or ham nonexistent in our home then.

After breakfast we ran into the front room, and the disappointment registered in our faces. Santa had not come. There were no presents.

Seeing and feeling our disappointment, Mama called: "Come on, it's Christmas. We will just enjoy being together."

During the day, Mama presented us with, what I now know, were very special gifts: the gift of music as she played her little accordion and we sang Christmas carols, the gift of stories as we heard about baby Jesus being born in a stable, and hearing that his birth was the greatest gift to all the world and a gift of love from our Heavenly Father on the first Christmas.

We received the gift of enjoying each other as we played games with Mama.

We enjoyed the gift of food that our mother prepared.

It didn't matter that there was no turkey, ham or chicken and no matter that there was no pie or cake. We ate what we had as though a royal feast was set before us — and indeed it was. Our mother had prepared the best Christmas dinner she could, with love and concern for her children.

Many Christmases have come and gone, but none occupies the place in my heart as did that Christmas. No family was ever more abundantly blessed, for in our poverty we had Mama.